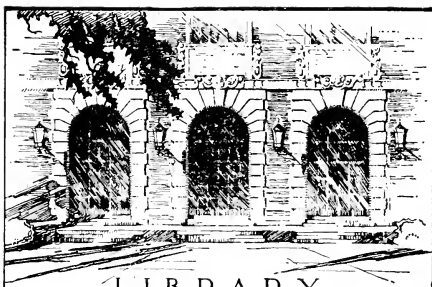

FLORA

(IV. KAL. AUG.)



THE ROMAN MARTYR

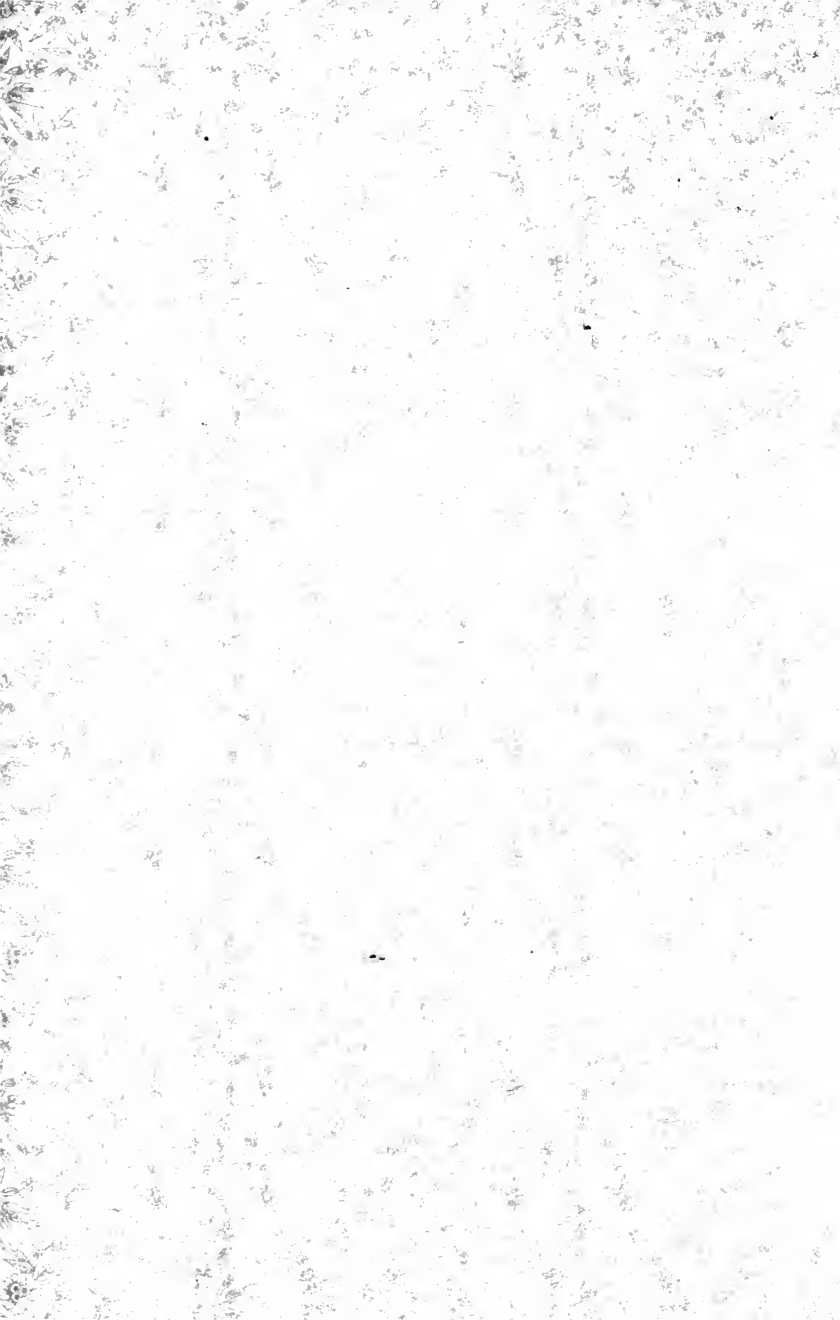


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Flora,

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AUTHOR'S FINAL CORRECTIONS.

- P. 45, l. 10 from bottom, 'Vale in æternum'.
- P. 150, l. 6, *instead of* 'we are all convinced,' *read* 'we are all witnesses to her innocence'.
- P. 178, l. 12 from top, *for* 'Romolo,' *read* 'Romulus'.
- P. 184, l. 11 from top, *for* 'friends,' *read* 'friend'.
- P. 184, l. 14 from bottom, *for* 'event,' *read* 'events'.
- P. 197, l. 14, *for* 'Pollua,' *read* 'Pollux'.

CHAPTER XX.

“THE gods are cruel, father !”

“Hush, girl. I have often reproved you for speaking in that strain.”

“And what does piety avail, father ? What has Vesta given us in return for the sacrifice of my sister ? I do not complain of myself, though my destiny seems to have been marked out for suffering ; but hers is a blighted life, to end, perhaps, in a living grave.”

“Do not allude to such a fearful sentence ; the Emperor revoked it.”

“No ! he only granted a delay. Now that he is gone to the East, leaving a cruel Præfect in his stead, the laws will be renewed in all their rigour. The imprudent youth has been lingering about Vesta’s temple this very day. He may have been met by some spy, and, if so, suspicion will fall upon her directly.”

The tribune, Nemesion, and his blind daughter were taking a walk in the cool of the evening in that part of the Campus Martius which was the least frequented by fashionable loungers and afforded a secluded promenade on the slope of the Pincian hill. It had been a hot summer day ; the air was charged with electric fluid, and a storm was at hand. Indeed very few persons had ventured out that evening, so menacing was the

horizon ; and the tribune had remonstrated with his daughter when she had asked him to take her out. "I love the storm," she said, "I want to hear its wailing voice"; and the kind father had yielded to the desire of his poor blind child. When once they were out of doors, however, they thought the storm was beginning to subside ; and after strolling up and down the Mons Pincius, ventured beyond its limits. It was when the girl felt they were out of the reach of hearers that the strange solemnity of nature, which always precedes a tempest, acted upon her excited feelings, and she gave vent to her ill-repressed hatred for the gods of her country.

Her father tried to chide her, as we have seen, but she overpowered him by her brief, energetic language, and her dark presentiments of evil.

"How do you know," resumed Nemesion, continuing the conversation they had begun—"how do you know Icilius has been near her?"

"Not near *her*! oh no, my father. His madness has quite passed away and his old passionate love has grown quite calm. I cannot understand that at all ; if once I love, I never cease doing so. But he is changed, very much changed. I fear me lest an evil eye should have been cast on him—a mysterious spirit has possession of him. He walked round the temple this very day, muttering incantations, and, when he withdrew, I heard him commending Volumnia to a foreign, unknown God."

"But how came you to hear him?"

“I go to Vesta’s temple every morning.”

“With whom?”

“Alone! Do you think I require any one to lead me to that spot? Oh, no! there is a strange, inexplicable sympathy which draws the heart to a place where it has suffered. As to me, who lost in Volumnia my second life, the light of these poor eyes, I feel I can trace each stone of the road which leads from our house to her prison. I have often watered it with my tears, and I would do so willingly with my blood, if it could but save her!”

“But how comes this, when I have made it a particular rule that you are never to be allowed out of the house without a guide?”

“It is just for that reason I choose the hour when all are asleep and the slaves have not yet risen to their daily toil.”

“So wily, Lucilla?”

“So constant, my father! It is sweet to feel alone as I do at that hour, going on my pilgrimage of love. The morning dew falls on my hair, and a sense of freshness steals over me, as of youth renewed. Alas! mine expired when she left me! The little birds sing to keep company with the lonely one, and the very trees on my way bend over me caressingly; the flowers breathe a mysterious language, and I understand them—they tell me of bygone days, they would almost make me hope in a happiness to come, even as their faded perfume revives at each creating breath of spring, but I will not hearken to them.”

“My poor child !”

“Father, I cannot live on in this way. There must be something real to rest upon somewhere. Doubt, despair, unhappiness are a punishment, they cannot be the natural or permanent state of man. We read of the Furies tormenting the wicked in Pluto’s kingdom, but why should innocent girls like us be doomed to sorrow ? There must be some reason for it.”

“How strangely you express yourself, Lucilla !”

“Because I *think*, my father, solitude has taught me to reflect. We all crave for happiness ; that is a proof that this longing must be satisfied. Will you be displeased if I say something more ?”

“You cannot say anything more unaccountable than what you have spoken already. Go on !”

“You have seen me restless, agitated, yet my share in the sorrows of life is not so overwhelming as that of others. There are some whom I know that bear their trials nobly ; and, when they grow faint and weary, almost inclined to revolt against suffering, they have recourse to this”—here she drew a small volume from the folds of her dress—“and become calm and happy.”

“Who are you speaking of ? What is this book ?”

“I do not know, I cannot see ; but you can read. Tell me yourself what is the book, for its power is very great.”

“It is written in Hebrew characters. It seems to be a collection of epistles, doubtless the advice of a sage ; there is a narrative too. Where did you get it ?”

“That you must never know. Read the book, and if

you find in it the remedy of which I told you, then give it me, if not, leave me in ignorance; let me rather hope there is a corner of earth whence despair is banished, where suffering produces joy, let me believe it, even if such be not the case."

A loud clap of thunder interrupted Lucilla, and the air vibrated a long time with the sound of that unearthly peal. "Oh, my child," exclaimed the tribune, "I was wrong in yielding to you, in bringing you out in this weather. Where shall we take refuge? There is no house near . . . we are quite alone."

"I hear the sound of footsteps; some one has just passed, at no great distance." She spoke below her breath, and listened intently.

"Where can I take you to? Come, put your arms round me, I must lift you up, the rain is falling so fast."

"Let us wait till the first shower be over. I feel that there are trees near; take me close to them; under their foliage we shall be somewhat protected."

He did as she desired him, and found another person had sought refuge there too from the pelting storm. It was Florentius, who recognised them with surprise.

"Nemesion, Lucilla! What! in this weather! What can bring *you* here? As for me, I am returning from the country and was caught in the rain. I have sent on my slaves for a conveyance, and am sheltering myself here as best I may."

"I am to blame," said Lucilla, "for inducing my dear father to come out; he foresaw the storm and yielded

to me. Oh, I was wrong! How anxious my mother will be!"

"What is the best thing to be done now?" said Florentius, "for the past hour is ours no longer."

"Will you take charge of Lucilla?" inquired Nemesion, "while I go to a friend's house and ask him to send slaves for her."

"Certainly! I shall cover her with my cloak."

The tribune left them, and Lucilla, instead of drawing near to Florentius, remained just where she was, holding out her beautiful hair to the rain and tossing off the water that flowed from it.

"What do you do that for?" inquired Florentius.

"Because I am hot and weary and soiled. I like the water to touch me. Would it could as easily refresh my heart."

"Your poor little girlish heart! Why, what ails it?"

"You know not how it aches!"

"Turn it to the wind and it will change. *O quam multivola est mulier.*"

"O Florentius, I am too sad to take offence at the quotation."

"I did but joke, girl. No one respects more than I do the virtues of your sex. Each day I discover something new to admire in my model home. I rejoice, Lucilla, that you spend so much time with my daughter."

"Flora is so good to me!"

"That she is to every one!"

"What can make her so universally good, and at all times too?"

"A purer creed than ours, puella, other thoughts, other hopes fixed on another life, in a word, another God!"

"Oh, that I knew Him!"

"The same wish has taken possession of my soul, and I shall no longer delay asking my child to be my teacher. I have long prided myself on the science that perisheth; fain would I now acquire that which, according to her, can never pass away."

"Does her God give peace, think you?"

"She says He gives a peace that passeth all understanding, and, surely, we see it in her."

"But how shall we know Him, Florentius?"

"By prayer, so she says."

"Then I will call upon Him, for my soul needs Him. Where is His temple?"

"Everywhere, according to my daughter, even in the storm."

"And His name?"

"I know Him but as the God of Flora."

There was an immense concussion in the air, and a crash as if something had fallen from the clouds; the whole scene had a fearful aspect. "How angry the gods seem to be," said Florentius, "at our mentioning His name."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the girl, laughing sarcastically; "those cannot be gods who are below us mortals, in virtue, in goodness, even in cleverness; blind and dumb, made of stone and iron, with hearts as cold and hard as those substances. I defy them, and willingly would I turn with you, Florentius, to the God of your daughter."

Again a flash, wide-spreading, oscillating like a fiery messenger sent to cast desolation on all sides, rent the air ; the girl and the man seemed to be for a moment enveloped in a sheet of flame. Though Lucilla's eyes were closed, that vast illumination seemed to strike them exteriorly ; she saw light, for the first time, as she often said afterwards, *on that day*, but her sense of vision did not extend further ; she called on Florentius, and heard him cry : " God of Flora and of her Christian brethren, I believe in Thee, save me ! "

Those were his last words on earth ; she heard a noise of crackling fire as the tree they had stood under scorched and withered up ; a strange smell of sulphur seemed to impregnate the air then came a hushed silence. . . . She was in presence of the dead !

About a quarter of an hour later, the tribune Nemesion returned to the spot where he had left his daughter and his friend ; the storm had abated somewhat of its fury, but the ground was soaked, and its unequal hollows formed little pools of water ; the slaves stepped over them, carrying a *lettiga* for their young mistress : " Where was she ? "

" I left her hereabouts," said Nemesion, " that was the tree all is silent Oh, avenging gods ! " The acuteness of his feelings gave him strength although his heart sank within him, when he saw no one, and with a cry such as the wounded lion utters over his slain young, the tribune called on the pagan divinities to give him up his child. Horror-stricken and speechless, he drew near to the tree which he saw

had been struck with fire from heaven, and was still smoking ! Had those whom he had left under its shade perished ? He called them by name, no one answered. He called again . . . something moved from under the smouldering branches . . . it was a female form that rose at the sound of his voice, tottered, and fell into his arms, insensible . . . his daughter lived ! . . . that was enough ! With a sudden revulsion of feeling, he raised her from the ground in a transport of joy and love. Little did it matter that her cheek was blanched, and her sweet voice hushed ; that, he knew, would return . . . but no harm had befallen her ; that was happiness ! He placed her tenderly on the lettiga, and, returning to the spot she had come from, he called several times on the name of Florentius. The ground was strewn with embers, the very earth was blackened, and, among leaves and branches, which emitted a dense smoke, lay, half-charred, the dead body of Florentius, struck by lightning. The electric spark, cruelly unerring, had not disfigured him : it had first struck his shoulders, where massive metal ornaments fastening his tunic had attracted the fluid ; it had severed his body in two, cutting through his steel belt, and run down his legs, which were burned like charcoal ; the head had not been touched, and the death blow had been so rapid that the blood, calcined, and yet warm, still breathed a faint glow of vitality on the cheek ; the eyes were not glassy, as in those who die of illness, but fixed, like a clock whose spring is broken, and marks

the hour at which it stopped. Thus poor Florentius' look retained the expression which had been its last : upturned, far-seeking, breathing of prayer, it told a strange mystery which Nemesion could not fathom. He was horror-stricken at first, and afraid to approach that corpse whose sinister death the ancients regarded as emanating directly from the gods ; the tribune hardly knew whether to look upon his poor friend as a marked victim, or as one whose privileged doom it was to have been consumed with celestial fire ; he feared to touch the dead body, whose semblance might crumble away in his embrace. Poor Florentius ! full of life but a few hours ago ! looking so brave and so handsome in his complete Roman costume, ornamented with that display of wealth which had attracted the electric fluid and cost him his life. He was a dear old friend to Nemesion ; they had assumed the toga virilis the same day, been married the same year, in short, they had walked through life side by side, and the loss of his own brother could not have affected the tribune more. He bid his servants move away, and, sitting down on a calcined stone near the yet warm clay, took up the still flexible hands which had so often lain within his own, in the playfulness of childhood, in the confidence of youth, in the manly friendship of later years. Oh, that death-touch which could not respond to his ! it went to the honest soldier's heart, and awoke the feelings horror had till then pent up ; he fairly burst into tears.

He would have remained a long time in the same position, for strong men's natures, seldom accustomed to

give way to emotion, hardly know how to control the torrent when once let loose, but two calls in different directions roused him to action. The first was on the part of the slaves who came to tell him that their young mistress, awakened from her lethargy, seemed to be ill, and demanded imperatively to be informed of what had taken place. The second call was from the Roman guard who were going their rounds ; they had orders to visit the scene of the late storm. Their youthful commander walked alone in front ; he saw, to his horror, a dead man lying at the foot of a tree, one sitting by his side ; he called him several times, but was unwilling to approach too close to view the awful catastrophe. Nemesion, distracted with his own grief, did not heed him, when a veiled girl, led by a slave, came to the relief of both ; placing her hand on her father's shoulder : "Are you here ?" she said ; "oh, do come near me !" Then extending her arm as if she was feeling for something in the air : "There was a voice here," she said, "a younger voice than yours, my father ; it spoke in tones I heard once in childhood ; if it be the voice of one I remember I would fain meet him now."

"I am Hippolytus, the son of the centurion," answered the young soldier. "I am doing duty for my father, who is too ill to venture out in this weather."

"I thought it was you," said Lucilla ; "your voice has not changed. Do you remember coming, as a little boy with your nurse, Concordia, to a garden on the Aventine hill ? Once a small, blind girl stood in your way while you were playing ; you heedlessly made her

fall down, and then you were so sorry, so generous in your compassion to her, so lavish of sweets and flowers to the poor little Lucilla."

"What!" he exclaimed, "are you indeed the daughter of Nemesion? Forgive me for not recognising you; but your eyes are open and fixed on me."

"And yet I do not see you; but, harken to me! I have much to say—my father is absorbed in grief for his friend; we must think of Flora."

"Of Flora! why, how? I do not understand."

"She is my best friend. Do you not know that it is her father who lies dead there?"

"Florentius! Oh, how awful! . . . I have only just arrived. . . . I had not recognised the features of the dead. But how do you know . . . how come you to be here? . . . I am obliged to inquire into this catastrophe, in order to report to my father."

"I was left by *my* father during the storm under the charge of Florentius; I cannot tell how the fire from heaven struck *him* and spared *me* . . . do not ask me to speak of that hour of horror . . . it makes me sick and faint! I must keep up my strength for Flora's sake . . . but what is that I hear? . . . There must be soldiers near, for that is the sound of armour clashing."

"Yes! my soldiers are behind me,—my father's guard."

"Will you then order them to surround the dead, and guard him till a bidental be called. You know that it is not allowed for any profane hand to touch one whom the gods have struck dead."

The young centurion gave orders as she had directed.

"And now," she resumed, "let us think of his poor wife and daughter; what will be their feelings when he, who issued from that house a short time ago, full of life, re-enters it a corpse."

"Oh, no! they must not hear of it suddenly; somebody must prepare them; those afflicted hearts must be armed with fortitude before the heavy blow falls on them. You know them well, Lucilla, you are devoted to Flora, nobody is better suited than you to this mournful duty; besides, you were present, and that in itself will be some consolation to them, to hear that he was not alone. They will be more disposed to accept the dispensation of the gods."

"The gods!" repeated the girl slowly, as if to herself, "they seem to interfere in everything cruel. But you are right, Hippolytus, I shall do as you suggest."

"Father," she said aloud, touching the shoulder of Nemesion, who had not stirred from the position he had assumed near his poor friend. "Leave the care of the dead to this young soldier, and come with me to comfort those who will mourn the loss."

He obeyed mechanically, for he listened to his daughter on every occasion; he loved her for her sorrows, which is the strongest of all affections, and taking her arm within his, without saying a word, or even noticing Hippolytus, he led her back to her *lettiga*.

"Stay near me," she said, as he raised her to her seat. "Keep my hand within yours, for I am afraid."

"The sky is serene now, my child, all danger is over."

"Yet, let me feel that you are by. Oh, what a boon is a father's love! Poor Flora can never know it more. Father, if I have not been sufficiently grateful, forgive me; my angered feelings often make me give utterance to words which my heart disavows."

The tribune bent over his beloved child, and she felt a tear fall on her forehead, where he left a kiss. She had succeeded in diverting him from the stupor which the late catastrophe had occasioned him.

"I want you to take me to the house of Siona," she continued. "We must prepare her and Flora for this awful intelligence. Tell me what I had best say; you who are versed in knowledge, both sacred and profane, father."

"Ah," he cried, "how vain are the sayings of philosophers to assuage the bitterness of real grief!" and he struck his forehead and breast as if in acknowledgment of his impotence.

"What is that," said the girl with her usual acuteness of hearing, "what is that you have under your *paludamentum*? You struck something just now which gave a rustling sound."

Nemesion put his hand to the ornamental plaited folds of his military uniform, and drew out the little book Lucilla had given him that very morning. He reminded her of the circumstance, which both had forgotten.

"Will you open it, father, and read aloud the first passage you meet? I want to hear your voice, though you be not inclined for conversation."

The centurion could read Hebrew with a little study ; he deciphered about half a page slowly to himself, then read aloud : “ I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord ; he that believeth in Me dieth not, but I will raise him up at the last day.”

He stopped, for he was astonished at the effect these words produced on his daughter ; she had sat up to hear him read, but now fell back with a half suppressed cry ; tears gushed from her eyes, and her face grew radiant with an expression which had never visited it before.

“ Child ! ” cried the tribune, alarmed at her emotion, “ this morning’s awful scene has been too much for you ; your spirit is sorely troubled.”

She took his hands, and, feeling for the little volume, “ More ! more ! ” she cried.

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Do you not hear the words, oh, father, which you read aloud ? Verily, in my blindness, methinks I see a light ! ”

He touched her eyes with gentle kindness as was his wont : those poor sightless eyes on which the light of day had never shone.

“ It is not here,” she said ; “ the light is not here, but within ! Oh, the last words of Florentius ! how they find an answer in that book ; read more, father, read more.”

“ I have lost the page.”

He opened the book again, and went on. At first he read mechanically, but soon his daughter’s hand sought his, and clasped it ; his own voice grew thick, and he

breathed with difficulty, for he read of One Whose name was Jesus, Who walked the streets of Galilee while crowds gathered round Him on the right and the left ; how, heedless of the applause of the multitude, He had turned aside to hearken to a beggar that called upon Him from the wayside, and had asked him what he wanted. And he that was a poor man, born blind, replied : “ Lord Jesus, that I may see ! ” And this great One Whom the crowd followed, endowed, as it seemed, with omnipotent power, gifted with the most tender compassion, had taken him aside, raised His voice to Heaven, and then stooped towards the ground, taken a little earth in His hands, moistened it, laid it on the beggar’s eyes, and uttered the word *Epheta* ! when forthwith the man’s eyes were opened and he saw.

Oh the powerful pathos of that simple story, heard for the first time in an hour of grief, told by a loved voice, and falling on a heart which long sorrow had seared, which cruel disappointment had almost closed to hope.

The tribune looked at his daughter. Her hands were clasped, not as he had sometimes seen her in the energy of despair, but in the devout humble attitude of prayer ; he saw her lips moved, and when he stooped down to hear the words she whispered, he found she was but repeating that petition he had read to her from the mysterious volume : “ Lord Jesus, that I may see ! ” She felt he was looking at her, and said in a wistful, earnest tone : “ Father, I wish I knew Him ! ”

“ Whom are you speaking of ? ”

“Of Him of Whom you have been reading. He is not cruel as our gods, but merciful. His accents, even though written down and repeated by others, infuse into me a peace I have never known. He is the One in whom Florentius believed at his last hour, knowing Him by no other name but the God of Flora. I want to know Him.”

“Child ! child !” replied Nemesion in a hushed voice, “I have often implored you not to speak so strangely. Do not hearken to vain fancies ; your mind is sore disturbed this morning ; no wonder.”

She relapsed into silence, and, though they had a great way to go before reaching the house of Florentius on the Aventine hill, and they were a long time on the road, neither father nor child exchanged one word more.

The slaves set down her *lettiga* in the *atrium*, as was their wont to do, for she was a constant visitor at that house. The slaves of Florentius came to greet her, and lead in the blind friend of their young mistress, but it was Nemesion himself who lifted her out, took her arm within his, and went at once to the *aula*, where he knew that Siona and her daughter generally sat embroidering together. They gave a warm welcome to both visitors, and Siona ordered refreshments to be served ; but the tribune with a faltering voice refused the good Falernian wine, to which he was generally rather partial, and, requesting the lady to be seated, told her he must speak to her of sorrowful things.

“What is the matter, Nemesion ?” she asked ; “does it fare ill with Rome ?”

"It fares ill with those dearer to me," he said, and hesitated.

"How can that be? Lucilla is by your side. Is Volumnia ill? Is it your wife?"

The honest tribune's eyes overflowed with tears, and sobs choked his utterance: "Forgive me, Siona," he gasped. . . . "Lucilla will tell you. . . . I cannot! but call me when you know all. . . . I shall remain near at hand!"

He withdrew, leaving them lost in astonishment, but the truth never occurred to them. They thought he was grieving over some personal sorrow; for it was well known that the fate of his vestal daughter was yet in the balance. They surrounded Lucilla, asking her to explain.

"Will you call the young Greek, your guest and friend?" asked Lucilla. "I wish she should be by me while I tell you: I am so inexperienced."

Flora went to call her friend Reparata; they returned together, and found Siona sitting with her hands clasped; her gaze was fixed on Lucilla, with an expression of anxious dread, but not a word more had passed between them. Flora kissed her mother, and observed her cheek was blanched and cold. The blind girl stretched out her arms as they entered: "I hear the footsteps of two," she said, "and one is very light; it is that of Flora's friend, let her come to me. Will you take me away?" she added, as Reparata drew near; "I must speak to you alone."

Flora looked at her mother, while the young Greek

quickly complied with Lucilla's request, and took her out to the garden. "What is this sad news?" she asked anxiously; "tell me at once, for I see my noble hostess overcome by a presentiment of evil."

"Woe to me!" exclaimed Lucilla. "I am indeed the bearer of awful tidings to this sorrow-stricken home!" So saying, she loosened the fillet which bound her long hair, and, making her companion touch the end of her beautiful tresses; "Feel how they are changed," she said, "and breathe the burnt odour they emit; fire from heaven has touched them. Only a few hours have passed since I stood with Florentius under a tree; he covered me with his cloak as an oak shelters a tiny flower; but oh that I should live to tell it! the strong tree was struck, the flower unharmed. Florentius is no more! he was immolated by the immortals!"

"What have you said?" cried Reparata. "I must know! yet I dread to hear it again. Speak low, lest your words fall on the ear of Siona."

"I have told you," whispered Lucilla. "Florentius fell by my side, struck by the lightning during this morning's storm."

"God of my Christian brethren!" cried Reparata, "have mercy on him and on them."

She could say no more; her feelings found vent in tears.

"I have more to tell you," continued the blind girl, with a calmness which was quite unusual in her; "that cry which you have just uttered was on his lips too; ere the scorching flame had done its work, I heard him

call out : ‘ God of Flora, and of her Christian brethren, save me, for I believe ! ’ ”

“ Did you really hear him say those words ? ”

“ I did, and I alone ! ”

“ Come with me then to those within, for the Almighty Hand that has stricken them has sent you to console ! ”

She took her by the hand and returned to where Siona and Flora awaited them ; she first led Lucilla to a low seat which ran all along one side of the *aula*, and then went to Siona. Taking her hands within her own, she knelt down by her side and beckoned to Flora to come near her. “ We are all ready to give up our lives for our faith, are we not ? ” she asked of both one and the other.

“ Yes ! ” they cried simultaneously, and added with a sigh of relief : “ Is that all that God demands of us ? ”

“ To purchase the gift of faith for another we would sacrifice our lives twice over if possible.”

“ Willingly ! ”

“ Then here is a sacrifice required at our hands, of more than life ; tortures of the body are soon relieved by death, but there are tortures of the heart too, and that is endowed with a strange faculty of suffering long ! Will you accept in this hour whatever be sent you by your Heavenly Father ? ”

Siona trembled from head to foot ; Flora grew deadly pale, but neither spoke.

“ Yes,” continued Reparata, “ we must, we will accept this sorrow, and purchase by it the salvation, the

eternal salvation," she repeated, "of one we have all loved."

Siona fell back on her seat; cold drops of perspiration were on her brow, yet she had strength to murmur: "Of whom are you speaking?"

Reparata bowed her head in anguish, made the sign of the cross, and, as if divine aid had strengthened her, she resumed her painful task. "It has pleased God," she said, "to take from us one whom we all loved and esteemed, one for whom we would willingly have laid down our lives; yet in His mercy He called him, not unprepared. There was a light given to his inquiring mind; he had seen it for some time, and grasped it at the last hour. Blessed be the name of Him Who maketh the blind to see and the lame to walk, for He hath done a wonder to relieve the anguish of our hearts. God appointed Lucilla to be near him we mourn at his last hour, to stand by him in the storm and to remain herself unharmed. She has survived to testify to his faith in our God, though yet unknown to him. Oh let us believe that the desire was accounted to him as a merit, that a terrible death served as the baptism of his soul, and that, like unto the penitent thief, whose first act of faith was followed by an eternal reward, a voice of pardon was uttered from above this very morning, saying, 'This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise'. Lucilla, come here; you witnessed what I am trying to relate. Now, tell us all!—tell my beloved hostess all you know of her lord; recount to his wife and daughter the last moments of Florentius!"

At the first sound of that name which the young Greek had purposely kept to the end, preparing them to understand their misfortune before she uttered it, Siona arose suddenly, hurried with a faltering step towards the blind girl, but staggered, and, as if struck to the heart, fell back senseless in the arms of her daughter. Lucilla got up quietly, for though she could not see, she guessed what had happened: "Lay the lady Siona on this soft seat; this is the best place for her; stretch her out at full length, and leave her to awake by herself; poor lady, she can bear no more at present, but let Flora come to me, for to her I must tell all".

Flora obeyed with the calm firmness of concentrated sorrow, listened to the blind girl's detailed account of that fearful death, heard all the words which had fallen from her father's lips, treasured them one by one in her heart to ponder over hereafter, but, for the present, she would allow no thought to prevail but that of duty: "I am afraid, under the circumstances, that it will not be permitted us to remove his beloved remains. Did you hear anything? can you advise me, Lucilla, as to what ought to be done?"

"I can only tell you that my father will take care that every honour be paid to his friend, but the *flamens* alone can touch him. Hippolytus, the son of the centurion, was doing duty for his father, and came to the spot at the head of his military band; he has undertaken to keep guard over the body of Florentius. Oh, Flora, teach me to know the God your father called on at the last hour. I want Him. . . . I crave for His know-

ledge. Harken to these beautiful words of His which I have learned: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life; he that believeth in Me shall never die, but I will raise him up at the last day'."

Flora was in that state of mind when habitual self-command prevails over strong feelings, and when we are enabled sometimes to perform the actions of daily life as if we were unconscious of what we are doing. The words of her friend were familiar to her, yet only struck her ear with an impression that the house must be put in order for her father's funeral. She embraced Lucilla, but said no more; she bent over her mother, but made no effort to revive her; perhaps she envied her state of insensibility. She went her way, whispering gently to herself: "I am the Resurrection and the Life!" Female slaves came to the relief of their mistress, but she did not speak to them; they had been told the sad news by Reparata, and all, without exception, wept bitterly over the fate of their kind and much-loved master. Flora understood their sympathy and mournfully smiled her thanks. The tie between master and slave was, as we have already noticed, very strong in that household: all felt they had lost their *paterfamilias*, and, with a refinement of feeling, which found its source in true affection, all were instinctively occupied in putting away, with the greatest respect and care, whatever had belonged to Florentius, lest the sight of those objects should add to the poignant grief of the survivors. Flora hardly knew what to do, but went from room to room, trying to put the house in order.

CHAPTER XXI.

HIPPOLYTUS remained alone in presence of the dead! For some time he was awestruck at the duty he had undertaken; then, calling his soldiers, he ranged them around the corpse of Florentius. They leaned on their spears, mourning, as if over a departed commander, and enclosing the space which was considered sacred, because, having been struck by lightning, it was hallowed as by fire from heaven. The youthful chief of the band despatched one of his men to acquaint his father with what had taken place; another to the temple of Jupiter Tonans, there to summon the priest who was to visit and consecrate, by peculiar rites, the place where the *fulguritus* (one struck by lightning) had fallen. He had covered the dead with his own *paludamentum*, first gazing long and earnestly on the upturned features, over which no agony of death had passed. Was it his duty, he wondered, to close the eyes of Flora's father?—those eyes she was accustomed to look into, and which could never return her gaze more. No! he dared not disturb the expression of that countenance, so strange, so speaking yet, as if the soul had been hushed just after conceiving a great thought. The soldiers were so well aware of the doom they might incur if they trod that consecrated soil, that each and

all dropped the military *sagum* they wore, until they had laid them as a kind of carpet round the corpse; they then mounted guard again, waiting for the arrival of the *bidental*, the priest who had been sent for.

And now, a low murmuring sound is heard in the distance; they know he is at hand, for that is the music by which he appeases the manes of the deceased, and which always accompanies the ceremony of purification. Poor Florentius! he was now denied the privilege of lying with his fathers, for his violent death had been ordained by the gods: for him there could be no funeral pyre, for the Eternal Essence had absorbed and extinguished the vital spark within him, as fire puts out fire; nothing earthly was supposed to remain in him whom a celestial flame had purified; his remains could not be removed, for his grave was ready marked on the very spot where the gods had laid him low. To his Christian household it seemed to be a strange coincidence and a great mercy of Providence that the ceremonies of a pagan funeral could not be performed over Florentius, as if in that hour, when the old creed had expired within him, the old superstitious rites had lost their hold on his lifeless remains. The blind girl had disclosed to them the last mysterious longings of that poor heart to which Truth had been revealed in that dread hour, and they trusted that the dying act of faith of Florentius had been accepted by Him to Whom all hearts are laid bare: they believed in the resurrection of that poor clay which had served as the earthly tenement of an intuitively Christian soul.

The different classes of the Roman priesthood had various names and functions. There were the Augurs, the most ancient of all, being those who interpreted the will of the gods; the Sacerdotes, who had the superintendence of different forms of worship; or, more properly, they were divided into two principal branches: the first were not connected with any particular deity, but were priests at large; the second were devoted to the service of distinct divinities; such, for instance, were the *flamines*, such also was the *bidental*, upon whom devolved all that related to the observation of lightning and its consequences, which was the object of much attention and respect among the Romans. His duty was comprised in the words *condere fulgur*: he wore a cap, without which it was unlawful for him to appear in public; it was surmounted by a pointed piece of olive wood, hence its name *apex*; a sacerdotal cloak called *lanæa*, woven by the hand of a priestess, was the official dress of a priest when he offered a sacrifice; this had, in former times, been the robe of state for kings: it was shaggy, both without and within, and was fastened round the throat by a clasp. The priest came to the spot alone, for the dead were not then considered sacred; no one bearing a holy character could venture to look at them. It was for this reason that funerals were conducted in the hours of night by torchlight, lest any magistrate or priest might contract a stain by accidentally meeting them.

The *bidental* came slowly up the hill, preceded and followed by his attendants, who were to assist him in the

sacrifice : one of these led the sheep, two years old, from which both the priest and the ceremony derived their name ; another bore the ewer wherewith to wash and purify the *bidental's* hands, before he offered the sacrifice to Jove ; another carried the flowers, the barley and flour required for the ceremony, and, lastly, came the *popa* who was to kill the animal with a hammer before the sacerdotal knife drew its blood. The soldiers moved aside, and the priest stepped into the hollow square, for it was not lawful that any foot but his should tread the consecrated soil. He knelt down, and, turning his face away from the corpse, he scraped the ground with a knife, brought for the purpose, and threw the earth into a hole which the lightning itself had bored ; thence, proceeding towards the tree, whose stricken branches strewed the ground, he gathered them together, burying them all, along with the earth, thereby raising a mound : the attendants collected large stones from about the place, and piled them on one another so as to form an altar ; the priest laid on it green branches which he lopped off the tree, then, taking a garland of flowers, he placed it on his head, preparatory to the sacrifice : the fire was kindled, the victim was first led round the enclosure, then brought into it ; some hair cut from its forehead was cast into the fire, as the *primitiæ* ; barley meal, mixed with salt, was sprinkled on its head, and then the priest did his office. The sheep, stunned but not dead, passed into the hands of the priest, who raised its head towards heaven, first, because it was offered to Jove, and next to earth, being immolated for the dead ; in which

position it received a stab in the neck, and its blood, yet warm with life, flowed freely. The priest then ripped it up, took out the best part of the intestines, which, being strewed with barley meal, wine, and incense, were burnt upon the altar : next, the flesh was laid on it ; the fire hissed, the wood crackled, a thick smoke arose, then sparks flashed, the flames spread : the sacrifice had been acceptable to the gods ; wine and incense were thrown over the whole, and prayers and music accompanied the solemnity. The priest's chaunt did not cease till the last embers had died away : it had risen with the flames, every note swelling as they spread, and now it expired with them. The *bidental* took from the fire an extinguished coal, marked with it a line on the ground all round the corpse, where a wall was to be erected to secure the spot from profanation ; then, sweeping together the ashes of the sacrifice, he summoned his attendants away. Time had passed ; the friends of Florentius had come, waiting outside the enclosure till the *bidental* left, when they hoped to be admitted nearer ; the soldiers had remained immovable, and their young commander showed by his respectful demeanour how deeply he was interested in all that went on ; his eyes followed the priest as he withdrew, and he had not noticed the bystanders, when a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice sounded in his ear, as deep and hollow as if it came from the grave :

“ Hippolytus, I thank you from my heart ; you have done duty in my name ; leave this place to me now.”

It was Laurentius who spoke, but his countenance

was so pale, his voice so disturbed, that Hippolytus was alarmed at his appearance, and, at first, hardly recognised him.

"Is it you, dear friend? I have indeed been watching over Florentius with the loving reverence of a son; but, forgive me, I was not thinking of you. I performed the duty for Flora's sake."

It was the first time the young soldier had acknowledged to others or even to himself the secret of his love; it gushed from him in that moment when his heart was full, by the side of that corpse, whose presence rendered every feeling sacred. Laurentius did not think of checking him, but accepted the confidence as solemnly as it was given.

"In her name, then, I thank you, Hippolytus, but your watch has been long. Go; there are friends with me who will perform all the necessary duties far better than you or I."

"Oh, I am unwilling to leave you," continued the young soldier; "let me stay with you as a brother would. I am anxious to know how your mother and sister bore the awful tidings. I saw Lucilla this morning; I know she took upon herself to communicate the sorrowful account."

"They are both bearing the blow with noble fortitude. They will come here at night-fall; they wish to mourn over him, for alas! we cannot transport the dear corpse to our own home."

"Oh, no! that would be profane. The laws are so severe with regard to a *fulguritus*."

“They cannot at any rate prevent me from paying him the just tribute of my tears. Hippolytus, call off your men. I wish to approach him alone.”

“No, Laurentius, not alone! let me support you. Come!” He folded him in his arms, and led him gently to the fatal spot; he himself raised the *paludamentum* with which he had covered the corpse, and disclosed to view the rigid features of poor Florentius. Laurentius did not speak, did not shrink, gazed into the yet open eyes whose expression was fixed in death, and seemed to read there something he had longed to know; for his countenance lit up with an expression of gratitude; he looked up to heaven with that gaze, and those eyes so peculiar to his race, the distinct feature as we have often said of that family on whose ancestor the Redeemer had looked once in His mortal life, but alas, in vain.

“I thank thee!” ejaculated the young man; “oh, God, I thank thee! that light which Thou didst bestow on him at the eleventh hour was not thrown away. Even as Thou didst once speak to one who died by Thy side, and called on Thee for mercy, so in Thy goodness Thou hast accepted this poor soul that thirsted for truth. Lord Jesus, have mercy on him, for he knew not what he did.”

“To whom are you speaking?” asked Hippolytus, lightly touching him on the shoulder and wondering. Laurentius recollected himself, and looked around him; he was surrounded by his father’s friends, who each and all called aloud on the dead man. “*Ave Florenti*,” they cried each in turn, and then made way for the *libitinarii*,

whose duty it was to wash and anoint the body with oil and perfumes ; but Laurentius represented to them that his poor father's remains were too much mutilated to be touched ; he was thus justified in their eyes when he dispensed with those ceremonies that savoured of paganism : the *bidental* sacrifice had taken place before he arrived, and was therefore beyond his interference, but he could now forbid a coin being placed in the mouth of the dead. They dressed him simply in a white toga ; they had brought with them from his own house a handsome couch to lay him on ; it was of sculptured ivory, and had never been used. Florentius himself had got it made lately, and presided over the workmanship ; he had said jocosely he meant it as a present for Flora's household when she should become a bride, and the girl had shuddered at the prophecy as if it conveyed a presentiment of evil ; she remembered that feeling now when she sent it out of the house to receive her father's corpse. They placed him on it, and laid him out, as if he were in the *atrium* of his own house ; the festive dress concealed his shattered limbs ; his feet were uncovered, as was customary for the dead, who were supposed to be prepared for a journey, ready to meet the dust and toil of the road. Poor Florentius !

Eight days generally were allowed to elapse between a death and a funeral, during which the deceased was visited by all his friends ; but the case of Florentius was quite different, and Laurentius invited all those who stood round him to return the next night, and pay the last honours to him they had all loved so well. They

all withdrew, both soldiers and citizens. The slaves planted in the ground all round the corpse torches made of ropes which had been impregnated in pitch ; these were peculiar to funerals, and it was from them that the ceremonies for the dead derived their name *funus*. The whole day and the evening passed in the fulfilment of the divers rites we have mentioned ; now night closed in, and the dead man remained alone under the canopy of heaven, with the stars looking down on him. Yet not alone ! for his adopted son watched in prayer by the sumptuous couch converted into a *feretrum*, and others were coming to share the pious vigil. By and by Laurentius heard footsteps drawing near ; he shaded his eyes so as to be able to see through the glare of the torches, but before he had time to look out, he felt a friendly hand clasping his ; it was Hippolytus, who said, " Let me watch with you, Laurentius ! "

" Is that you ? so soon again ! Oh, you have been doing duty all day for me. "

" When I took the men home, my father was pleased they had been so well employed. He too loved Florentius well. Who did not ? Come, let me stay ! Why should you prevent me when my own father does not ? " He saluted the corpse, saying, "*Ave Florenti*," and passed on to the foot of the bier, taking his stand in a firm, respectful, military way, as if determined to do duty there. Laurentius continued to kneel at the head, praying in silence, regardless of his friend.

About an hour passed away, when the night breeze brought the sound of voices singing a low, melancholy

chaunt ; Laurentius raised his head : “ Those are my mother and sister,” he said, “ with their female slaves ”.

They came up, preceded by torch-bearers ; then a retinue of women, with heads uncovered, and hair dishevelled, filled the air with lamentation. They sang the praises of the deceased, interrupting their chaunt with loud cries of sorrow. They drew near, and two among them came forward whose very silence proved them to be those who mourned the most. Laurentius rose, went to meet his mother, and supported her tottering steps ; he felt her hands burning with a concentrated fever, and he looked at her features, so ghastly pale in the torchlight, so fixed in their vacant stare, that they bore a fearful resemblance to him who lay dead. “ Has she wept yet ? ” he asked of Flora, who, accustomed to be the strength of others, needed no support.

“ No ! ” replied the girl ; “ all my efforts to extract a word from her have been vain. She followed me here, mechanically ; God grant this scene may not overpower her ! ”

Laurentius was alarmed at this account, yet he had often heard there are hidden resources in nature itself, even in its hours of weakness ; he took his adopted mother by the hand energetically, and led her close to the dead. The sight broke on her suddenly ; the barrier of overwrought feelings gave way ; she uttered a long, low wail, and, bursting into tears, fell on her son’s neck. The slaves came forward to the assistance of their mistress, but Flora whispered to them : “ Leave her to

me. It is better so. This is necessary grief. I am now more tranquil about her."

Siona's life had been so wound up with her husband's that, from early girlhood, her pure heart had hardly known any other thought or care but the love of him and of her children: it was therefore to be feared that, in her affectionate nature, the chord which bound her to his very existence might affect hers when it snapped asunder. Laurentius and Flora would not, therefore, assuage the paroxysm of her sorrow, but let her tears flow as long as was necessary to relieve her aching heart. When she recovered, she was able to speak, and addressed the departed in terms of endearment as of old: "Florentius, my lord," she said, "I have faithfully borne thee allegiance to this hour! . . . How long and pleasant was the path we trod together, since the day when, casting thy lot with a Hebrew maiden, thou didst choose to make the daughter of an oppressed people the mistress of thy hearth. . . . Oh, how happy I have been by thy side for so many years! May God reward thee for all thy love and kindness. . . . Thou didst deserve better than a pagan's doom; mayest thou rest, even as we hope, where the Christians love!"

As she thus gave utterance aloud to her thoughts, a slight pressure of the hand from Laurentius made her aware that a stranger was near. She looked up; there was a youth standing behind Flora, composed and respectful in his demeanour, clothed in armour, his eyes cast down, and his spear fixed in the ground. She recognised Hippolytus, the son of her earliest friend.

How came he there? He seemed to be in the attitude of a mourner; . . . why was this? she wondered. Then there returned to her mind a confused and dreamlike remembrance of what Lucilla had told of the awful event. She understood that youth had been mixed up with the catastrophe, for she had heard his name mentioned by the blind girl. She now beckoned to him to come near to her.

“Were you a witness?” she asked. “Will you tell me all you saw? I am more courageous now; I can bear to hear. . . . I should like to know all.”

“I only arrived when all was over,” he replied. “I came in time to save those dear remains. Do not weep, noble matron; for the fate of Florentius was such as becomes a great soul like his. Struck by the Immortals, he did not see death approach, but dissolved into the Eternal Essence; it was just what he would have chosen for himself; therefore, do not mourn!”

“May Heaven’s blessing attend thee,” exclaimed Siona; “thou speakest with a gentle prudence, far beyond thy years, and thou hast acted nobly towards my beloved lord. From my heart I thank thee. Thy mother was my friend! Methinks, her sweet spirit lives in thee yet!”

She placed her hand on his head; he took it within his own, pressed it respectfully to his lips, then returned to his self-assumed place near Flora. And the young girl, regardless of herself, stood there, between the living and the dead; to all who surrounded her she was destined to be a light, a support, a hope! Whatever seeds

of faith her father had carried to the throne of God were due to the sweet influence of his child. The frail girl was strong because she believed in her destiny ! She had undertaken to perform what her ancestor had failed to fulfil. Oh, how powerful was that call, which, unheeded by the young man of the gospel, had passed as an echo of undying love to the heart of Flora !

The moon rose on the scene, first tipping the surrounding trees with light, then, as it ascended, pouring effulgent streams of radiance through the branches. Finally the orb of night rode high in the heavens, and lit up the whole scene with such splendour that the funeral torches blazed ghastly in the brightness. Flora looked round, not to seek comfort in the face of nature as had been her wont from childhood, but because there is a strange fascination exercised over us in the hours of sorrow by the objects with which we have been familiar in happy days. That moon ! she had loved it with the innocent, inexplicable poetry of a childish heart ; she had watched it later, with the dreaminess of girlhood, with a mysterious longing : it seemed to have been always before her, and was the emblem of an Immortal Providence ! Thus its brightness had rested on her and her father, one night in the amphitheatre of Nicæa, when she had confided to him the secret of her religion. Had it continued ever since then breathing to him secrets of divine import, even as it had done to her pure, gifted mind, which read in the exterior world tales of learned lore it was not given to all to fathom ? What a familiar old friend that moonlight seemed to her ! Would it continue

thus to haunt her through life ? would it, one day, rest upon her grave ? She, too, would die one day ; grow cold and stiff, as the poor corpse before her. . . . Would she be thus laid out for friends to weep over ? She hoped not . . . she prayed that her life might be one of self-sacrifice to those she loved, followed by the immolation of herself to the Almighty Will. The violent death of the martyrs, the outpouring of her life's blood, in union with Christ's sacrifice ! such was the vision that arose to that girl's mind, the desire of her life, the prayer she poured forth in that hour, when one of the chords that bound her heart to earth had been severed. As she knelt thus, her mind rapt in sublime thoughts, her pure forehead so pale in the moonlight, while the torches gleamed over the folds of her sable *stola*, Hippolytus turned towards her his bronze shield, on which there played that *lux æëna* spoken of by Virgil ; and she looked to him encircled in a silver halo by the reflection. He could not explain to himself the nature of his feelings, but he felt there was something hallowing in each communication he had ever had with Flora ; and even now he understood for the first time what was meant by prayer.

Hour after hour passed away, during which the mother and daughter continued their vigil, simply wrapped in their mourning *pallia*, without any regard to the night air. Laurentius had more than once urged them to depart, but they did not heed him. At length, when the moon had reached its climax, showing the night to be far advanced, he begged of his mother to go

and take some rest, for Flora's sake, if not for her own ; but then the widow objected the lateness of the hour ; she could not traverse the streets without her son, she said, and she would not draw him away from his pious duty of watching the dead. Laurentius turned to his sister, " This is too much for our mother," he said ; " the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak ! "

Flora cast a look of enquiry on the young soldier by her side ; she did so with the innocent trustfulness of a guileless mind, and saw he would do whatever she wished ; then, bending over her mother, who was still kneeling : " No more ! " she said, " there is an hour to weep and an hour to rest. Mother, arise ! Hippolytus is waiting to conduct us home." She gently put her arms round her, and affectionately drew her away.

Laurentius kissed the hand of Siona, and placing it in that of Hippolytus : " Will you take charge of her ? " he said, " for, verily, you have been as a brother to me to-day ; will you fulfil a son's duty towards her now ? "

" Willingly ! " replied the other, bending over the proffered hand, and pressing it respectfully to his lips, he added, but so low that no one heeded the words, " Oh, that I could do so for life ! "

The female slaves gathered round her, and covered her dishevelled hair with a fold of her *pallium*, ranged themselves two and two behind her and Flora, and the sad procession moved on. They passed by the flowery gardens, so numerous in that part of Rome ; they went down the hill, through the *Campus Martius*, so noisy in the day-time with the busy hum of life and the con-

course of fashionable visitors ; so silent and deserted now, even as their own hearts. On, on they went, down through the city's thoroughfares, across the *Forum*. How strange they looked at that hour, those public edifices, veiled in that semi-darkness, and clothed by the moon's fantastic light with a grim, death-like hue ! The temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the temple of Concord, the Arch of Septimius Severus, seemed to have attained colossal proportions when divested of all gradations of light. Their solidity seemed to defy destruction ; they were the triumph of man's genius, and endowed, seemingly, with something of Rome's eternity. Generations had arisen and expired at their feet, yet still they awaited till the false gods they sheltered should crumble into dust before the Mighty One, and their past deeds and glories be remembered but as a thing of dreams !

The mourners came near the Capitol. The *Arx* stood out in the moonlight's refulgent brightness. It was the culminating summit of the seven-hilled city ; like a watch-tower placed on the troubled seas of the world's glory, a beacon-light for all nations to take warning from ; for, on that height, sacred to the Roman people, Liberty had found a cradle and a grave ! Oh, the renown and the fame of that consecrated spot, which flashed from it, as light from a diamond ! oh, the tales that were connected with it, of early patriotism and private wrongs, of self-denying heroism and merit unrequited ! How many, could their shades haunt that citadel, would tell us they had died there, for having loved their country, not wisely, but too well !

The Roman ladies passed on silently with their slaves ; their thoughts were with the dead, but even at such a moment they could not forget that the Tarpeian rock was a tomb. From the first hapless maiden who had betrayed her country, and lay buried there in her shame, her name surviving her, until future generations learnt to connect it with the idea of ignominy, down to the last poor victim who had been hurled from the summit, all those slain criminals seemed to float as a vision before the mind's eye in that fitful gloom. Flora shuddered as she remembered that was the rock where parricides expiated their crime, and that such might have been the doom of Icilius. The same thought had stolen over Hippolytus ; and he broke the religious silence he had observed till then to inquire of Flora whether the recovery of that poor youth continued to be permanent : " He looked so well the day we met at the festival of Latial Jove," he added. " He seemed so happy ; I wondered why, but I understand now, what was the cause of his happiness. I have learned so much to-day ! "

" To-day ! " broke in Siona with some incoherency of expression ; " who speaks of to-day ? To-day can only come once ! To-day has done a long sad work ! . . . to-day has destroyed the happiness of a life-time ! But I do not repine ! I am resigned . . . quite resigned ! "

" Noble matron," said Hippolytus, " you have spoken to-day of many things which I have heard for the first time ; the strength you found in prayer, the hopes you entertain of a reward beyond the grave, all this has made

me think much. When your grief seemed well-nigh uncontrollable, Flora subdued it by a philosophy that seemed to me strange on the lips of one so young ; she made mention of One you call Christ, and you invoked Him in that hour, regardless of my presence. You did not turn to the gods of Rome, but to a strange God to comfort and console you. I understood that you belong to the sect of the Christians."

They all stood still ! A convulsive start passed over Siona's frame at this unexpected announcement ; but Flora did not betray any emotion.

"Fear not !" resumed the young soldier. "If I tell you what I have discovered, it is because I deem it honourable to do so. I shall never betray you. And on this day when the outpourings of your afflicted hearts have made me acquainted with a secret upon which so much of your happiness depends, do you think I can look upon it in any other light than that of a sacred trust ? I shall never, I pledge you my solemn word, give utterance to what I now know, either before the gods or before men. I only implore of you to remember me if ever you are discovered ; if, as I fear, you be called upon to expiate the crime of being Christians, then, if you would seek safety in flight, call upon Hippolytus and count upon his serving you."

"If you consider our religion to be a crime, why do you offer to abet it ?" asked Flora in a voice which was almost stern.

"Pardon me, if I use that term ; it is from the habit of hearing others do so. I cannot for a moment suppose

that *you* could stoop to such wickedness as I hear Christians accused of."

"My brother will prove to you whenever you choose how vile are those calumnies and how innocent are our pursuits."

"I do not require any proof besides your word. I believe you. I now understand what was your motive for wishing to see Icilius. You taught him your religion. I have heard that your principles are somewhat like those of the Stoics. It was that, I suppose, which imbued him with such fortitude during his imprisonment."

They were now close to the house of Florentius, and the watch-dog within barked as he heard their footsteps. The ladies thanked the young soldier and entered their desolate home.

The morrow's sun rose on the corpse of poor Florentius, which no one was allowed to remove from the spot where he had fallen, for it was supposed the vengeance of Heaven would alight on such as disturbed those remains. However, he had so many friends, and all so devoted to him, that they would not consent to foregoing any of the honours that were usually attendant on the funeral of a Roman citizen. It was then arranged that a funeral procession should take place from his own house to the place where he was now lying. The family residence on Mount Aventine was not chosen as the starting point, but another town house near the Tiber, which, being very central, would be more convenient as a meeting place for the mourners. The day passed by, and all preparations

were duly made. As evening closed in again, the *Dominus funeris* took his station in the *vestibulum* of Florentius' house, and directed the procession as it moved out. First came musicians who played mournful strains on different kinds of instruments ; next the *præficæ* or mourning-women who lamented the deceased, singing a funeral hymn in his honour ; these were followed by many slaves who had been enfranchised, and were called *pileati* because they wore the *pileus* or cap of liberty. They had grown old in the service of their honoured master, and clung to him even after he had set them free, for that was a happy, blessed household, where chains sat lightly on its slaves. Most of them, moreover, were Christians, and happy to find a safeguard for their religious practices in the protection of Siona and her daughter. But he who would have mourned his master more deeply perhaps than any, the noble-hearted Claudius, so long the favourite of that house, was the only one wanting in the train of faithful domestics. Many thought of him and regretted that that strong arm and clear intellect, so devoted to his master's interests, were not at hand to support them now. Next came those who bore the waxen figures of such of Florentius' ancestors as had attained to the *curule* dignity. They were dressed in official robes and were blackened from the smoke of the *atrium*, where it was customary to preserve these sacred images. Behind these came the relations of the family—the men wearing veils and the women with their heads bare and hair dishevelled, which was in exact opposi-

tion to daily custom. They passed through the *Forum*, which was an honour generally reserved for patricians ; but all could testify that Florentius had borne an unblemished name to the grave. His great fortune, which had gradually increased by honourable means, had been nobly employed, for he had ever been a generous patron of the arts and a kind benefactor to the poor and needy. He was a good, upright, beneficent citizen ; and as such all declared him entitled to a funeral oration. This duty devolved by rights on his adopted son ; but the extreme youth of Laurentius seemed to render him inadequate to the task, which was undertaken by Nemesion. The tribune mounted the *rostrum* in the *forum*, where it was usually customary to lay down the body for a little, while the procession stopped on its way. A short, well-worded harangue was delivered, of which truth formed the principal merit. Tears stood in the eyes of many as he delineated the virtues of Florentius' private character. He did so with a soldier's brevity ; yet, when he brought his *Laudatio* to a close, many applauded him on having spoken like an orator.

“ Say rather ‘ like a friend,’ ” he observed ; “ I have known and loved him all my life long ! ”

He resumed his place in the funeral procession, which moved on at the same measured pace to the appointed spot where they were to meet the dead. Florentius was still lying where the lightning had struck him. A richly sculptured sarcophagus had been conveyed to this his last resting-place ; it was uncovered ready

to receive him. By a strange coincidence the dead man had ordered this monument of his but a short time before. He himself had chosen the design, and had preferred marble to a certain stone which was often used, and which, it was supposed, consumed the body in forty days. Indeed, the sculptor was still engaged at his work when the news of Florentius' death reached him, and he hastily put the finishing stroke with his chisel. The mourners now left their ranks in the procession; one and all approached the corpse, fearlessly touching the lips with their own; the last farewell was spoken; then they lifted the couch on which he lay, and placed it gently without disturbing him in the sarcophagus. He was now concealed from view, and the priest could draw near without any fear of desecration. He went round three times, sprinkling lustral water on all who had taken part in the ceremony. A *præfica* uttered the words, *Illicet, id est, ire licet*, announcing that all might depart, as the funeral was now closed. All present saluted the deceased in the prescribed terms: *Vale æternum! nos te, ordine quo natura permiserit, cuncti sequemur.*

Then the marble lid was raised by machinery and the united efforts of strong men; and all that had been Florentius was concealed for ever from mortal eye. Flowers and wreaths were laid on his tomb by the female members of his household, and the melancholy procession withdrew.

For nine days, as was customary, the family visited the place daily; but no offerings were ever laid on

the monument, no cakes or victims were presented to the gods, no libation was poured on the ground. This caused some surprise, but it was supposed that his strange death was the cause of this departure from the usual customs. Fresh flowers were continually renewed—perhaps as a homage to his name of Florentius. On the ninth day, the *novemdiale*, which was considered as sacred, a feast was held called *silicernium*, and a banquet was offered to the friends of the deceased. Already a wall was being raised round his tomb, meant to shelter from all profanation the place where he had fallen, which was thenceforth kept sacred as a *bidental*.

CHAPTER XXII.

THERE is an hour in the day when all nature seems invigorated in the sensation of approaching rest. Stillness is but concentrated strength; and when silence grows around us, and shadows lengthen on the earth, there is a freshness wafted along by the evening breeze which reanimates the exhausted frame. Oh, the charm of that last hour of daylight as it lingers on the arid Roman *campagna*, when the flowers, drooping to their nightly slumber, emit a perfume more powerful than during the day; when the birds, nature's choristers, raise their little voices to burst forth in unison before they grow hushed in the darkness: even the grim old tombs seem toned down in shade to harmonise with that subdued light, and cast interminable shadows as the sun nears the horizon.

There was a rivulet which ran along the *Via Appia*, in the fields, below the level of the road. Once a stream, it had left its mountain home, miles and miles away; weary perhaps of peaceful obscurity, dreaming of renown to be found in the great city, it had bounded at first in fulness and strength over the obstacles that stood in its way, dashed impetuously down headlong precipices, rejoicing in its tempestuous career, even as a young heart, wild with exuberant youth: by degrees it had

grown wearied out with its own efforts, wasting its riches and fertility on the barren fields, as it rolled along until it had dwindled into a streamlet, hardly noticed by the passer by, unless, perhaps, a parched traveller might seek in its clear waters a draught to allay his thirst, or on its banks a cool spot to rest on. Perchance too, the little brook, as he gazed upon it, might reflect back to him the tale of his own life, replete perhaps with early longings and disappointed hopes. Alas ! 'tis the history of many a heart, from that day down to ours !

Presently, there came a sound of voices from behind the tombs ; innocent voices of little children, not prattling gaily, as is the wont of their age, but speaking earnestly, and in a tone of enquiry. For some time they were concealed from sight, then came out to the roadside. They were two, a boy and a girl : both were clinging to the hand of an elderly man clothed in poor garments, and wearing a long beard : he was a strange personage to draw such little creatures to him : they were of gentle birth, as was discernible from their delicate features and the fine texture of their garments ; yet their rude-looking companion spoke to them in a tone of authority, and they answered with respect. He was evidently very dear to them, for when he bid them go and play together, they held him by his tattered cloak, and, caressing him fondly,

“ Oh, dear Uncle,” they said, “ do not send us away yet ; do tell us one more story, only one more ”.

“ Do not think, dear children, I mean to dismiss you

when I desire you to play. I mean, on the contrary, to keep you till your father and mother come for you. Some days may elapse before I can carry out my plan. You remember my injunctions to you, when you see my brother Adrias or his wife Paulina on the *Via Appia*, coming in this direction ? ”

“ Yes ! ” said the little boy, trying to look wise ; but he stopped short, for he had forgotten all about it ; his little sister, who was by far the more intelligent of the two, came to his aid.

“ If,” she said, “ we see our father or mother on the road, we are to beckon to them, but not go to meet them ; we are to ask them to follow us to your cave, that they may listen to the nice good things you tell us, so they may learn to be truly happy, and ” . . . she paused, then put her finger to her forehead on which she made a little sign of the cross.

“ Right, Maia,” rejoined her pleased uncle ; “ I am going to leave you and Eone to watch. I fear you must be hungry, dear little ones : it is very praiseworthy of you, accustomed to dainties at home, to be satisfied with the poor hermit’s fare ; but I expect a visit from Laurentius this evening, and I asked him to bring some provisions for my young guests ; so be on the look-out, and, as soon as you see him, bring him to me.”

“ Yes, uncle,” replied Maia, who seemed to consider it her business to answer both for her brother and herself, as well she might ; for, when she turned back to look at him, she found that while his uncle was speaking, he had amused himself in carrying stones to the brook,

piling them one on another, and by these childish efforts he had succeeded in raising a little square pile. Maia laughed: "It will fall," she said, "and splash water all over you".

"Then you must set it right," he said, accustomed as he was to refer every difficulty to his sister. They began to play now in good earnest, varying their pastime from the culling of flowers to burrowing holes in the sand. They never wearied, though hour succeeded hour. The sun was setting when little Maia took her brother by the hand: "We must go back to Uncle," she said, "we must go pray with him, you know, as he has taught us, and then we shall go to sleep in his house".

"I had rather go to our home," replied the boy.

"No, Eone, we have promised to help him in making our parents Christians, and we must do as he tells us, and stay with him, as long as he desires. You know we are no longer children."

"No!" he answered looking grave; "we are Christians now."

They were just turning down into a side path, their little white tunics fluttering in the evening breeze, when they heard a low whistle, and a well-known voice called them by name. They looked back, and saw a young man coming towards them, walking so quickly, that he had joined them very soon; he jumped over the brook, and, taking up the little boy in his arms: "How fat and big we are getting, Eone! Why! old friends won't know you again; and you, Maia, always good? yes! I see it in your face".

“ My name is Maria now,” she whispered.

“ Oh, I understand, you have been baptised ! Was it this very day then ? God bless thee, little one,” and he kissed with the greatest reverence as if it were something holy the little hand she held out to him ; “ thou art too wise and innocent for Roman worldliness ; mayest thou be called to the great reward to which thy Christian brethren aspire ! ”

He set down the little boy, and, taking a small basket he had concealed under his *penula* : “ This is for you,” he said, then, following the track which led to the cave, they all three entered the dwelling of Hippolytus, who welcomed Laurentius most warmly.

“ But what makes you come so late this evening, my dear pupil ? ”

“ Many things occurred to delay me. In the first place, the *villici* of our different farms had agreed to meet and give me an account of the crops, the produce and improvement of the land ; I found it very hard to cast up their accounts and take an interest in them ; I am much more at home in iambics and philosophy. Hippolytus, this every-day life is toilsome work ! what trouble those household concerns give us ! How can I busy myself about things which must soon pass away ? How useless it is to amass treasures which every Christian must despise ! ”

Hippolytus laughed. “ Oh youth ! youth ! ” he exclaimed, “ ever given to exaggeration. Do you not see how wise it was of your adopted father to teach you, while yet young, to look after his property ? Thus you

are able now to watch over the interests of your mother and sister."

"Do you think it would be presumptuous in me to pray for martyrdom ? I think my sister does."

"Pray to do the will of Our Father Who is in Heaven : as for Flora, do not seek to fathom the secret aspirations of *her* soul ; may God watch over her !"

"I think there is some danger impending over us, Hippolytus ; Rome is not the same since the death of Misitheus. I do not like Gordianus being away ; he protected us, he is so just."

"Have any new edicts been issued ?"

"No ! there is no talk as yet of religious persecution ; but from the Præfect having renewed the former investigations about poor Volumnia, I fear he has some sinister intentions."

"Did not Flora obtain the Emperor's full pardon for both those young people, or rather for Icilius ? Volumnia had not offended either God or man."

"But you know that Gordianus was superstitious : he postponed all inquiries into Volumnia's case, but he would not acquit her ; he dared not interfere between Vesta and her priestess."

"Poor girl ! there is no one to plead for her."

"I have not yet had the courage to tell Flora, she is so devoted to her friend ; and as to Icilius, I fear this shock may bring on a return of his complaint."

"Oh, no ! I do not think so : he has grown so calm and self-possessed since he became a Christian. But this poor innocent girl, the victim to an impious creed,

would that we could enlighten her! Do you think your sister could obtain free access to her?"

"I do not doubt of that; but if it were discovered that she has tampered with a Vestal's religion, she would in her turn be accused of sacrilege!"

"Well, mention to her this my wish, for, if it can be carried out, it can only be by Flora. And now to our lesson," he resumed, as, taking down, from a small recess in the wall of his cave, a volume which he reverently kissed, he took a rustic seat, and Laurentius settled himself by his side.

"Wait an instant, my good master, till I have delivered a message to these good, patient children. Here, Maia, take this basket which Flora has filled for you, and spread out the contents before your brother and yourself."

"Thank you," she said, "we shall go behind the rock so as to amuse ourselves without disturbing you," and she led the little Eone away.

"Laurentius," observed Hippolytus when they remained alone, "you were just as young as they are now, when first I met you in that garden of Mount Aventine. Little did we know that it would one day become my happy charge to prepare you for the priesthood."

Then the deacon began to expound to the youth the Holy Scriptures, that book closed with seven seals confided to the care of the Church, the Spouse of the Lamb. The hermit had learned much from solitude, and was well qualified to instruct the inquiring mind of Laurentius.

Solitude is a powerful teacher ; the want of intercourse with other men increases our powers of concentration, and communicates to the soul a strength it previously knew not. Silence is for the mind a healthy and congenial atmosphere, wherein it expands, unsullied, deriving its life from within. Those who are little practised in human converse seem to commune more easily with the spiritual world, and acquire sometimes a superiority of intellect which makes them soar far above their fellow men : those who live alone preserve the healthy vigour of youth even when age declines ; for it is not so much physical toil that exhausts the frame as the wearing away of the heart and soul, and these are consumed by lingering sorrows, hopes deferred, mental exertions which often overtax strength ; and, what is worse than all, there is a falsehood ever going on, a constrained deceit which must needs be practised by all who frequent the haunts of men, a daily lie, fatal destroyer of youth's best charm, which imparts to it the wiliness of age, and, despoiling the character of the hallowed simplicity of childhood, renders young natures old before their time. To those who have suffered, solitude is a powerful healer, for it restores us to ourselves ; and, to the guileless mind, it opens a source of knowledge, how rich, deep, and lasting those who have sounded it alone can tell ! There is a divine part of our nature which longs for something beyond this world ; we may forget its superiority while we are absorbed in the business of every-day life, but solitude reveals it to us again. The Voice which spoke to Adam in the garden,

and revealed to him his celestial origin, is ever ready to disclose great mysteries to the man who holds commune in silence with his own heart. And thus it had been with Hippolytus! The effeminate Roman, the Sybarite whose dissipated life had well-nigh prepared for him an early grave, regained the strength of youth, when he embraced the practices of Christian penance; his mind, purified and elevated, found, in withdrawing from former associations, the revelation of a new life within him. Great things had flashed before him: solitude taught him to examine them; and thus, a vast horizon had opened to his view in that dark cave. Truth! the scope of all science, had come within his reach; and verily, solitude, instead of being lonely, had brought round him the companionship of new thoughts, the acquaintance with new things; the created world seemed to him now peopled with wonders, he grew wise, and learned much, more than many have done in a life-time.

Night fell on the hermit and his pupil, as both, deeply interested in the subject they were studying, had suffered time to pass on unheeded. They had been reading and commenting on the Acts of the Apostles; the martyrdom of St. Stephen had been their lesson of that night, and Laurentius, sitting on a low stone by his master, pondered the subject long and deeply. Hippolytus perceived that his young scholar was no longer listening to him, and he stopped reading, for he rightly conjectured, from the youth's demeanour, that another teacher had taken possession of his soul, and that lessons of a far higher import were being whispered to him by the Spirit Who

breatheth where He wills. The hermit rose, lit the lamp that hung from the vault, and, withdrawing to the inner recess, made some preparations to receive his little nephew and niece, who were to spend the following night in the cavern. After some time he returned to Laurentius, whom he found in the same attitude of deep recollection ; the light of the dim lamp fell on his features, but the spiritual light within made them radiant with a holy joy. Hippolytus thought of the passage they had been reading with reference to the young deacon, Stephen, when he stood before the council : " And his face, as they looked on it, was like the face of an angel ".

He looked out on the road, and, seeing that night had set in, he went up to the youth, and, touching him lightly on the shoulder : " Dear pupil," he said, " it is time for you to leave this place, and return to Rome ".

Laurentius was roused from his reverie by the pressure of his master's hand, but he had not taken in his words, and resumed aloud the train of thought which had taken so strong a hold of his mind : " Do you think," he asked, " that Stephen regretted in that hour not having received the fulness of the priesthood ? He was only a deacon ; do you think that if he had lived to reach his ordination it would have conferred on him additional grace and strengthened him to meet his fate ? "

" It is my opinion," returned Hippolytus, " that his only wish was to be pleasing to his Heavenly Father ; and if the Divine Will saw it good for him to be called in that hour, though his priestly vocation was yet unfulfilled,

yet I doubt not his deacon's garments, tinged with his early blood, have shone as brightly before the throne of the Lamb as the deeds of some who have lived longer and more arduous lives."

"Then may my end be like his," murmured Laurentius, giving, half unconsciously, utterance to his heart's desire; "may I die like him in my deacon's robes, only may my martyrdom be more painful than his, so that the demerits of my idle youth may be expiated in that hour!"

"Beware, my son, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; even when we are following the dictates of a noble heart, and forming high resolves, self-love may deceive us."

"Omnia possum in eo qui me fortificat."

"Then let Him choose for you."

"So be it."

He rose to depart. "I shall walk with you part of the way," said Hippolytus; "I do not like to send you out on the lone road at this hour."

"But the children will be frightened if they find they are left to themselves."

"That is true. I hardly know how to take care of them, I, who for so long have had no visitors, but the bats by night and the lizards by day."

"Well, to say the truth, I am surprised at their parents allowing them to pass the night here."

"They have never done so yet: but how could I, on this, the very day of their baptism, send back my dear little ones to their pagan home? The slave who brought

them to me this morning returned with a message to my brother, saying I expected him to come and fetch his children himself. I have great hopes that, if I attract Adrias and Paulina to come and hold serious conversation with me here, it may lead to their conversion."

"I should not be surprised, for there is a strange fascination about your hermit's home, Hippolytus; gloomy as it is, it is impregnated with an unearthly atmosphere, as if the many prayers it has recorded, the presence of the All-Seeing One you have so often invoked, clung to its very walls. But hark! some one is knocking without; I trust there is no fear of intrusion, or danger for your young charge."

"No! we have no cause for alarm; the secret of my dwelling-place is known but to very few." Yet as he spoke there was a perturbation in his manner which belied the security his words implied.

He went out, taking a lamp with him; Laurentius meanwhile put up a brief prayer for the general safety, and withdrew to the entrance of the recess, where Hippolytus had arranged a soft bed for the little Maia. She was now sleeping there in the innocent security of childhood; the little boy was pillowed near his uncle's hard couch; neither of them awoke, though a pretty loud conversation went on at the door between the hermit and his unwonted visitor. Presently he returned, talking gaily. "Laurentius, we are indebted to your sister for thus alarming us; it is one of your Christian slaves who stands without, while others are stationed on the road to accompany you home with

torches. Flora sends you word to tarry no longer, for there are strange reports circulating in Rome, and a collision is to be feared in the morning between the Senate and the Prætorian guards; indeed the man says," and here he lowered his voice to a whisper, "it is rumoured that the Roman Empire is at this hour without a master."

"God forbid!" returned the youth. "I must indeed leave you without delay; but I now regret your having kept the children, Hippolytus."

"So do I; but, if there be an outbreak in the city, the poor little things are safe here. I must request of you to go in my name to my brother and sister as early as you can to-morrow, so as to relieve their minds from all uneasiness. And now farewell! may the holy angels go with you!"

He led him to the orifice of the cave, where the slave was waiting, and remained looking out till the receding form of Laurentius and the light of the torch grew lost in the darkness.

At a certain distance the youth was met on the road by a retinue of slaves, who surrounded and greeted him affectionately. They had recognised him on account of the single light borne by his side, but the torches they bore were all extinguished and reversed. Laurentius enquired what was the cause of this.

"Master," they explained, "we have just escaped from a great danger. As we were all ranged here waiting for you, we heard the neighing of horses and clashing of arms; we retreated and concealed ourselves

behind the tombs of the wayside ; we put out our torches to avoid detection. As the soldiers drew near, they halted to rest their horses a little before entering the city. They were very boisterous ; spoke loud and angrily. From the words that reached us, we found they were a detachment of the Prætorian guard, who had travelled from the East to bear tidings of great import to the Senate. Our good Emperor, Gordianus, is no more, and his successor, Philip, has been already proclaimed by the army."

" Philip the Præfect—oh, sorrow ! Alas for the wise, good Gordianus ! he must have died in battle."

" No ! " resumed the slave who had addressed his master the first ; " they spoke of his death as of a violent one, and they named his murderer Philip."

Laurentius was deeply affected. " Oh, my God," he exclaimed, " hast thou indeed permitted this ? Dead ! and by the hand of Philip, an Arab, the son of a chief of robbers. Oh, Rome is now fallen indeed ! when the blood of the brave and gentle flows thus with impunity, and the imperial purple is torn from one that graced it to cover the deeds of an assassin. Oh, the ambition of that man was apparent in many of his deeds before he left Rome, and we grieved to see him chosen as successor to Misitheus ; but who could have looked forward to this ? Let us mourn for our noble sovereign," continued Laurentius, addressing his slaves and controlling his emotion ; " let us pray for him too, for we Christians owe much to him ! May the good his heart desired to do be accounted to him as deserving of reward."

Laurentius had thus spoken freely before his attendants ; for in that Christian household the bond of fraternal charity was stronger than the legal tie of master and slave ; a common interest united those whom society had placed so far asunder. They had all kept near their young *Dominus*, forming a guard, some in front and some behind him. Having lit their torches again, they walked together at a good pace, and had now reached the *Porta Carpentana* when they met another escort of slaves issuing from the city and bearing torches likewise. Laurentius recognised the patron they were escorting : it was Adrias, the father of the little children he had seen that day in the cave. Guessing at once that the anxious parent was going in search of them, he went up to him, and drawing him aside : “ Eone and Maia are with their uncle,” he said.

“ How can you be sure of that ? ”

“ I saw them but an hour ago : he is watching over them while they slumber. It will be much safer for them to remain where they are than to be exposed to the night air, not to speak of the dangers to be met with abroad, which we ourselves had better avoid. Turn back with me, Adrias ; we have both of us duties to fulfil in our homes, for our country is in peril.”

“ I think you are right ; I shall leave the children to my brother’s care.”

“ And now tell me what you know. Has the news spread in Rome that our loved Emperor is no more ? ”

“ Yes ; the report is confirmed. Philip is our Cæsar. Gordianus placed great confidence in him, at all times—

far too much. The Præfect was wily and could easily impose on the gentle nature of our sovereign. He showed himself continually at the head of the guards, and, when they had got accustomed to see him command in person in lieu of the Emperor, he despatched him privately. Several days passed before the deed transpired, and the army imagined they were obeying Gordianus, when they had already passed under the dominion of Philip."

"Poor young emperor; had he met with a glorious death on the field of battle, that, at least, would have conferred lustre on his name. Is the new Cæsar coming to Rome?"

"No! he must first terminate the Persian war, so it is said; but more likely he will hesitate to appear before the Senate with hands still reeking with Gordianus' blood."

"And we shall see Rome receive him, bloodstained as he is, for the sun of her liberty has long since set; she has grown venal and enslaved, and civic virtue is with us but an empty name."

"It is hardly wise, my young friend, to give utterance to such bold thoughts in the open streets, and it is well we have reached your house. Good night! and thanks for the kind information about my little ones' safety. I must now hasten to calm my wife's uneasiness."

So saying they parted. Laurentius found the *aula* empty when he entered, and rightly conjectured the household were all at prayers in the oratory. He went there and joined in the last response which fell from the

lips of all present : *Dominus det nobis suam pacem.* Then the slaves withdrew, and the young man remained kneeling, absorbed in his own thoughts, heedless of the presence of the ladies of the household, who seemed to await some explanation from him. "Is it not time," he said, "O King of Peace, to come and reign over this kingdom, which is divided within itself and can no longer stand?"

Here he stretched out his arms as the early Christians were wont to do when praying. "How long, O true God, wilt thou let the darkness of idolatry overshadow this benighted land? Is Thy coming deferred that we may long for it the more? Give me, O Master, Whom alone I serve, some part in the glorious work; let me, weak youth, toil for Thy Glory and help to extend Thy Reign. Or, if Thy hour be not yet come, let my blood be shed for Thee as was that of Thy saints; let me not have loved Rome in vain, but rather allow me to plead for my country, as a victim, in Thy sight, in life and in death."

History is at hand to tell us how that boy's prayer was heard.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was a fine sight to see the Roman people pouring out from every dwelling, patrician or plebeian, mingling in the streets, then diverging towards the different thoroughfares, then separating again as each sought the shortest way towards the general focus of attraction. Now a living stream appears to be rolling down the *Via Sacra*, which gradually subsides as the citizens station themselves on the steps of the public buildings along the road ; many take places on galleries raised for the day, thus commanding a view of the show. All are clad in their best attire, wearing the tunic with fringed sleeves, *ad manus fimbriatas*, the embroidered *balteus* or belt serving also as a purse, the senators and their sons distinguished from the rest by the wide purple band *laticlavium* on their tunics ; instead of sandals on their feet they wear black *calcei*, shaped somewhat like boots and ornamented with golden crescents. The poorer classes of people have come in from the country for the day, and look brave and joyous in their modest *penula* (cloak) and *sculponæ* (wooden shoes) ; they seem to consider themselves quite as important as their betters, realising the Roman device—*Senatus populusque Romanus*.

All were assembled to gaze on a triumph. Philip, who had left Rome as captain-general of Gordianus, was now returning as emperor. Although suspicions were well founded as to his being the author of his sovereign's death, these were hushed up, so forgetful had the Roman Senate become of what was once virtue. A victory over the Persians, which, in reality, was due solely to the extinct monarch, served as a pretext for Philip's demanding the honours of a triumph; and, although he had previously incurred the displeasure of Rome by concluding a shameful peace with the Persians, to whom he had given up Mesopotamia, yet the subsequent submission of the enemy, without a new war, gave him apparently a right to the *triumphus*, so much coveted by every Roman general. From early dawn all the temples were thrown open, garlands decorated every shrine and image, incense smoked on every altar, the streets were so covered with flowers as to look like variegated carpets, and every countenance beamed with joyful expectation. The *Campus Martius* was particularly thronged, that being the place appointed for the procession to fall into order previous to entering the city. The cortége opened by a troop of musicians playing on different instruments and singing hymns; then came the Senate, which had gone to meet the victor, and now preceded him in the triumph; next, carriages on which were arranged frameworks laden with spoils, statues of gold and silver, idols from the East, precious vases, gorgeous carpets, arms and presents, all heaped in apparent confusion, but in reality so artistically arranged

as to display their richness to the most advantage; boards fixed on *fercula* were borne aloft, on which were painted in large letters the names of the vanquished nations and tribes; models were exhibited in ivory and wood of the captured cities and their citadels; pictures displaying the scenery, mountains, rivers, and principal features of the conquered land, with appropriate inscriptions; gold and silver, in coin or bullion, weapons and horse furniture of every description; all these objects were carried separately by slaves, forming part of the pageant. A band of flute players preceded the white bulls destined for sacrifice, with gilded horns, and their heads decorated with crowns and fillets *sertis et infulis*; the slaughtering priests walked by the side of them, attended by their ministers the *Camilli*, who bore in their hands *pateræ*, with other sacred vessels and instruments. These were followed by tame elephants, taken from the enemy's camp, accompanied by prisoners, who were for the most part soldiers and inferior captives, the hurried peace not having admitted of any leaders falling into the hands of the Romans. Behind these again walked the lictors in single file, their *fasces* wreathed with laurel; they were followed by musicians and dancers, dressed as satyrs, among whom one called Pantomimus, clothed in Persian robes, mimicked the manners of the conquered people with strange buffoonery, to the great amusement of the bystanders. A long train of men, bearing perfumes, known as *suffimenta*, came next in view, and now, at last, appeared the Emperor in a circular chariot of peculiar shape, drawn by four white

horses. Philip was attired in a gold embroidered robe, *toga pieta*, and flowered tunic, *tunica palmata*; he bore in his left hand a laurel bough, in his right an ivory sceptre surmounted with an eagle; his brows were encircled with a wreath of laurel, his face was painted vermilion colour, like Jupiter's statue on days of pomp; he wore, suspended from his neck, an *auræa bulla*, containing an amulet or preservative against magical charms or malefices which it was supposed might be cast on him as he passed. By the side of the conqueror, who thus towered high above his fellow men, there stood a little boy, his only son, not joyful nor amused at the scene, as is the wont of children, but apparently insensible to all this pomp, through which he passed with a vacant gaze and a contracted brow. That was a strange little one, and history assures us he was never known to smile. That dark young face was to Philip a mirror in which he could see reflected the image of his own remorse, or perhaps he read there the prophecy of a fatal doom: the child was already associated with his father in the empire, but, alas! a diadem that had been purchased with blood would one day be resigned even as it had been won!

There was another occupant of the triumphal car, standing behind the conqueror, so that his lips were close to his master's ear, and from time to time he whispered as he held a jewelled crown over the Cæsar's head, "Remember thou art but mortal!" This custom was peculiarly striking, in an age when worldly pomp was looked upon as the summit of happiness; it is probable that the warning fell unheeded upon those who, in-

ebriated with triumph, disdained the thought of death. Nevertheless, at those moments when the ominous words sounded in Philip's ear, a cloud passed over his brow, and his face assumed a ghastly hue, as if he were gazing upon a fearful shadow. On either side of the chariot rode the *tribuni*, *equites*, and *legati*, all on horseback ; and, finally, the cortége was closed by the troops, drawn up in their order of march, their spears adorned with laurels ; they shouted from time to time *Io triumphe*, which cry the citizens took up ; then they sang their own praises, as well as those of their general, in verse ; not unfrequently mingling thereto some piquant raillery, which those best understood who had been witnesses to the conqueror's rapid rise and previous ignoble career. In those days people were not accustomed to hush up or even admire the faults of their rulers : there was a liberty of speech allowed in Rome, particularly on these public occasions, to which our modern liberty of the press is as nothing. The sun rose high in the heavens, and still looked down on that ever passing, yet ever brilliant pomp ; for the different groups we have described occupied each a considerable space, and the eye wearied with gazing on the seemingly endless pageant. When at length the Emperor came in sight, the people knew that little remained behind, and many left their places to proceed to Jupiter's temple to witness the sacrifices which at this hour were being offered on every altar in Rome. Some went to the door of the Mamertine prison to watch the captives, whom it was customary to take there and strangle, just as the procession was as-

ascending the Capitoline hill. A general disappointment was manifest when the report spread that, by the order of Philip, no such execution was to take place on the occasion of this triumph. Although prisoners of war followed the car, and they were manacled according to custom, yet, as the gay procession neared the Capitol, that strange boy, who never smiled and who stood by Philip's side, crept closer to his royal father; no one heard what passed between them, but the Emperor made a sign to his captain of the guards to approach, and gave him an order, which was forthwith transmitted without; there was to be no immolation of prisoners. The crowd murmured, but a gleam of satisfaction passed over the conqueror's face, a very transient one, for he looked down on his hands, and muttered so low that no one heard him but the child at his side: "There is blood enough already here".

Having reached the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, Philip alighted from his triumphal car, and, leading his son by the hand, veiled his head as one about to hold mysterious commune with the gods, then ascended the steps to offer the sacrifice which was a thanksgiving for his triumph and a hallowing of his reign. An ample tribute was selected from the spoils to be offered to the god; the laurel crown worn by the Emperor was deposited in Jove's lap, and Philip remained in the temple till nightfall, partaking of a public banquet offered to him and his principal adherents. The consuls, previously invited, had been privately requested not to come to this feast, in order that Philip might be the most distin-

guished person of the company. It was not till late at night that a crowd of citizens, holding torches and playing on pipes, escorted the Emperor to his palace on the Palatine, and the long day of triumph was at an end.

Philip remained standing on the threshold of the imperial residence till the crowd that had accompanied him dispersed; and when the very last of the citizens had disappeared, he went out upon the hill, and looked up at the two laurels sheltering the palace door, which had grown to a prodigious height since they were first planted there under the reign of Augustus; so much so that their pruned branches and thick foliage gave them in that uncertain light the appearance of a funeral monument: "Raised," said the Emperor to himself, as the reflection struck his fancy, "to the memory of those who have dwelt in this palace, and who one day passed out from this very threshold I am going to cross. They went their way, some to war, some to the senate house, some to pleasure, ay, often and often; but a fated day arrived when they went out to return no more. There is for each of us a destiny we cannot control. It is not my fault that I have succeeded to Gordian's empty throne; it was thus preordained. I could not help my boy sovereign if he was so weak that the soldiers chose me in his stead; it was the work of fate. Poor Gordian! the thought of him haunts me strangely to-night! I dread entering this palace; I fear the very sight of that royal *cubiculum*, where the couch he used through life must become mine."

He covered his face with his hands for a few moments,

then looked up again, and his eyes met with a sight that made him shudder. A figure, clad in a white toga, stood at some distance from him, looking unearthly strange in that glimmering light; he could not distinguish its features, but it seemed to be of low stature, like the late Emperor. Philip stood transfixed, until the form moved, and came towards him; as it did so, he breathed freely, for he recognised his own son.

“What do you here at this hour?” he asked, almost sternly.

“And you, father?” mildly answered the strange boy who had never been seen to smile, to weep, or to betray any of the weaknesses of his age.

Philip looked down on the impassible countenance before him; it was not in his power to chide that youthful being whom nothing of joy or sorrow seemed ever to move. He had been thinking of fate, and accusing it of deeds done in the past; was it not perhaps destiny that now concealed itself, rigid and inexorable, under the features of that boy, so different from the children of earth? Not another word passed between them for a considerable time, till the youth touched the rich garments which the Emperor yet wore fresh from that day’s triumph.

“Do they not weigh upon you?” he asked; “will you not take them off?”

Philip, obeying mechanically, raised his hand to the rich *fibula* on his right shoulder, which supported the toga of Phrygian embroidery, exclusively worn in triumphs; the garment, being thus unfastened, fell by

its own weight ; his son folded it up, carried it into the palace, and returned with a thick and shaggy cloak, which he placed on his father's shoulders, then, taking him by the hand, said in a tone of entreaty which was almost peremptory : " Take me away ; come with me to where the air blows more freely, where it is easy to breathe ".

" It is late," expostulated Philip ; " we both of us require rest, after the fatigues of this day."

" No, father, you are not inclined to rest ; I know it, for I saw you just now shivering with cold in the moonbeams ; come with me, and warm your blood with quick walking ; let us go into the Campagna to banish thought ; after that you will be able to sleep, but not till then."

The father hearkened to that strange child, and they went down the hill silently, down through the Forum, along the Circus Maximus, on, on to the Porta Carpentana, out on the Via Appia ; Philip made no remark all the time, for, unwilling as he was to acknowledge it, fear had stolen over him on the threshold of his imperial residence, and he was fain to fly from it. The Roman sentinel that watched at the Porta Carpentana knew not who were those who at that late hour walked the road of the tombs. The thoughtful boy asked his father for that day's watchword ; and, having given it, they passed forth, Rome's ruler and his son.

It was the Appian Way which we have already described ; at that time the funeral monuments and the names they bore were so familiar to the Roman passer-by, that he could salute by name each of the illustrious

dead without even stooping to read on the *sarcophagus* the title page of that life which had been stored up, like a volume to be added to the roll of time. The long gallery of death began with the Scipios; the Magna Parens had received the dust of that hero who had wished his bones to lie far away from ungrateful Rome. Half-way towards Alba the Long, three circular mounds marked the tombs of those three brothers, born at one birth, and doomed to one death, the proto-martyrs of Roman liberty, the world-renowned Curiatii. Philip felt struck with peculiar awe; his hand grew cold in his boy's grasp, who yet dragged him on, impelled by one of those strange fancies, sometimes inherent to young morbid temperaments. In the midst of that day's pomp he had longed for this unearthly scene, and now his physical strength succumbed under nervous excitement; they had hardly reached the first milestone beyond the gate when the boy clung to his father, letting all his weight fall on the arm which he grasped. The latter put his other arm round him, and would have lifted him from the ground, but he said: "Let me rest by the roadside, I shall soon recover". Philip folded his cloak round him, and stood by, aware that the iron will of that child would master the momentary faintness.

The Emperor of Rome continued to stand alone without guards or retinue on the public road at that strange hour, yet feeling at heart more rest than he had experienced during the whole of that day's triumph. Elsewhere, the memory of his past crimes was wont to rise before him; the death of Mithras, whom he had

poisoned to obtain his place as præfect, the death of his royal master later ; but in this place, he could not experience fear, and for the time remorse was hushed ; for he knew that from beneath the very ground his son rested on, from the very fissures of the soil, there arose a prayer and a sacrifice whose merits he believed could shield even such guilt as his. Philip was at heart a Christian, though he had fallen away from the practices of the true faith, but, before the dreams of ambition had interfered with the humble duties of a follower of the Crucified, he had received baptism. He still remembered the beauteous lessons of bygone days, of a God Who forgave, and Who orders His disciples to forgive. Alas ! that God was unknown to Gordianus ! The victim of his ambition lay far away in his gory bed, nor could he ever hope to meet him, perhaps not even in the other world, with the boon of pardon. Oh, the loveliness of that creed, which accepts of sincere sorrow as an expiation for sin, which washes us anew in the Blood of One that was slain for us ! Oh, how Philip longed for one hour, one short hour passed in those vaults, the very atmosphere of which purifies and hallows ! Presently the night breeze brought to him sounds of suppressed voices, which seemed to issue, as it were, from behind the tombs ; he glanced at his son, who was likewise listening : “ Art afraid ? ” he whispered ; but the young boy answered with a vivacity which showed he had recovered his strength : “ Let us go and punish those who violate the sanctity of the tombs ! ”

He rose, and would have carried out the threat, but

Philip held him back forcibly ; he knew that none but Christians could haunt the road at that hour ; he longed to meet them, to breathe the purer atmosphere with which their holiness surrounded them, and which, he superstitiously believed, would cling to him too. Was he not one of them ? Ay ! but their God taught lessons of lowliness, of justice, of love ! He himself had learned those lessons once and practised what they taught ! He had trod that path with the faithful on nights such as this, and prayed by their side ; and now there rose to his mind the memory of those earnest supplications, of those sweet hymns of the Catacombs, as he stood there, alone, encircling with his arms the boy whom he had soothed into quietness. Philip felt a yearning towards his brethren take a strange hold of him at that moment ; could he go back to them ? he wondered, he the poisoner, the murderer, risen to be a Cæsar ? after having attained the very pinnacle of his ambitious dreams ; could he look, if only at a distance, on Christian faces once more ? He relaxed his hold of his son, took him by the hand, and they both proceeded in the direction whence the voices had reached them. He looked round, but could not discern any light . . . he stopped to listen . . . the voices did not proceed from underground, nor from the roadside . . . evidently this was not a case of Christians returning from their worship ; . . . might they be conspirators ? Ha ! He turned in another direction towards the cultivated campagna and followed a beaten track ; there was no moonlight, but the stars were bright enough to guide their steps, and show the outlines of

surrounding objects ; the ground under their feet seemed to crumble away into sand, and they came suddenly upon a huge mound of soft, friable earth.

“ We are near an old excavation,” observed the, till then, silent child.

“ Then I was mistaken,” observed Philip, “ for *they* would never come here ; but see, here is an entrance ! ” He cautiously felt his way and found they had come to an arched vault, such as, we have already explained, it was necessary to erect over the excavations in the sandy soil, in order to support the field above ground ; when a sufficient quantity of the sand had been extracted in one part, the workmen would branch off in another direction lest the cultivated land should subside ; there were consequently many passages which Hippolytus had neglected to fill up, his long residence in the cave having accustomed him to regard it as a place of security. Philip and his son stationed themselves in an angle where they were completely sheltered from observation. It was not, properly speaking, a congregation of Christians, but a small chosen number, that had gathered together that night in the cave of Hippolytus ; a Vestal was among them, and perhaps it was to screen her more effectually that they had taken refuge in this place as being nearer to the city where she must necessarily return to her post unobserved. That gloomy cave presented a blessed sight : there was the hermit Hippolytus, not way-worn and ill-clad as was his wont, but robed in a deacon’s *dalmatica*, and kneeling by the altar of his cavern-home : it was a rude *ara*, formed of stones

hewn out of the rock ; candles and flowers had been placed upon it ; among these lay a withered palm branch, which each kissed reverently, for they knew it had been steeped in a martyr's blood. A rough chair had been hewn out of the rock by the owner of the place ; it was now covered with costly trappings, which had been brought from a Roman home ; and thereon, clothed in the pontifical vestments which have become traditional, and to which the Church jealously adheres to this very day, sat the Father of the faithful, the Pope Stephen. He was speaking, and those happy few that gathered round him hung enraptured on the words that fell from his lips. We are already acquainted with the history of each : Eone and Maia, the two little children who, first attracted by their uncle, had entered Christ's fold before their parents, sat at the feet of the Sovereign Pontiff ; and, ever and anon, as he explained some mystery of the faith, his hand would rest on their head, for to such as they was promised the kingdom of Heaven. Behind them stood their father and mother, Adrias and Paulina ; drawn at first by the innocent plotting, and later, urged on by the loving solicitations of their brother, they had long delayed, but they had entered the fold at last. Next to them, holding each other tight by the hand, as if fearing another separation, were the two daughters of Nemesion, by their father's side.

The tribune, so long and so faithfully true to an earthly allegiance, had met with his reward : the Master Who never forgets had called him to His service. When

standing by the corpse of his friend Florentius, a heavenly light had flashed upon him for the first time ; that light had followed him, step by step, to where he now stood, and he had shared its influence with another. The child of his love, the blind one, from whose hands he had received the tiny volume containing the revelation of eternal truth ; was that child to remain in a state of darkness more terrible than that to which fate had condemned her ? No ! from the sacred pages he had poured out to her all that his own mind loved to drink in, and the work proved to be already half accomplished ; for she had sat too often at Flora's feet, pondered too often the lessons which the Christian maiden unconsciously let fall, not to respond to the first invitation : "Take me with thee, father, for I believe !" had been her answer.

And when God's love had settled on that household, was one of its members to be left out—one who had been its pride and its victim ? No ! Volumnia was not forgotten, neither by her dear ones nor by Him Who had loved her even before they had. Flora had sometimes accompanied Lucilla as a friend when she visited her sister, who, as she advanced in her probation, was less watched and left often alone. The young Vestal was allowed to see her relations more frequently, and derived much consolation and instruction from the conversation of the two girls. She had been torn away from the well-springs of affection at a time when her heart most panted for the draught ; she had exerted the full powers of her adamantine will to cover from all eyes

the wound that could never heal. Would she now linger and hesitate when a Voice reached her saying : “ Come to Me all ye that are burthened and I will refresh you ” ? Oh, no ! she arose and bade them take her to Him Who, satisfying all the wants of her bruised soul, would be to her Father, Friend, and Spouse. “ There is something within me,” said the maiden, “ which seems to warn me this frail tenement will soon succumb to the struggles it has endured so long ; the freshness of youthful health has left me ; the furrows of age have already settled on my brow ; the hour is nigh when this spirit, whose immortality I have learned from you, will leave its mortal envelope. I must not then delay ; take me with you, lest death arrive and my soul go to seek its invisible God, unmarked with the sign which will render it pure in His sight. Take me to Him—oh ! take me soon.”

The next time that it came to her turn to watch the sacred fire, the girl plied it carefully with fuel ; then unfastened, with great precautions, the bolts of the door of the temple. Presently a preconcerted signal warned her of the approach of a person from without. She covered herself in her veil and cautiously moved the heavy portals. A current of cold air rushing in made the fire on the altar leap up with a sudden flame. The girl trembled : thus, she had been taught, was the goddess wont to testify her anger against those who profaned her sanctuary. . . . Was it indeed the goddess ? . . . All the time-honoured superstitions of the Magna Mater rose to her mind’s eye at a glance ; . . . must she now prove herself faithless and untrue

to them? What if she were, at the present moment, mistaking error for truth? Oh, the happy past in her Roman home! the uncertain future! But the signal from without was renewed. One step across the threshold and she felt herself clasped in the embrace of one who would shield her from all harm;—her head sank on her father's breast and she wept. He bore her quickly along, well knowing that her feminine weakness was always an exception, and that self-command would soon reassert its empire. However, she did not recover her usual composure till Nemesion reached the spot where his Christian friends awaited him. Lucilla called upon her sister's name; she stretched out her arms and chafed her chilled hands till she felt the glow of life return to them. Then they went on their way together, at first in silence and fear, but soon peace and joy were borne to them by the Spirit that breathes where He wills; and when they entered the solitary's cave, as had been previously agreed upon, they rejoiced at hearing that the Common Father of all the faithful had promised to be present at the function about to take place there; for the great Pastor loved the hermit of the wayside, who had often brought stray sheep to the true fold, and he was fain to show him how he prized his labours. Oh, this was to be a great night, full of joy both in heaven and on earth!

Philip remained immovable in his hiding place, his mind reverting to bygone days. Oh, he knew this religion well! its star had appeared first in the East, where his own birth-place was laid. He too had bowed to the

Divine Infant Whom his forefathers had been the first to adore ; he himself had, in humbler days, professed the faith of Christ—had been redeemed in the saving waters together with his wife. He felt that *that* water must flow on his child's head too, or perhaps he might never live to wear the imperial diadem. Poor boy ! there was something so strange about him ; and he pressed closer to his side, concealing him in the angle of the projecting rock.

Since Hippolytus had assumed the office of deacon and received with it the power of conferring baptism, he had often preached Christianity, and administered the Sacrament in his cave. A baptismal font had been excavated for this purpose in the ground, into which neophytes descended by steps, for the receiving of baptism by immersion ; it was filled with water, and enclosed by a low wall, outside which stood the officiating minister. Now the preparatory instruction was over, the Pope left his seat, and proceeded to the font ; the little children, with religious and grave demeanour, led on their father and mother, Adrias and Paulina, who, repeating together their act of faith, bowed at the same time their heads beneath the hand of the Pope, and he, taking up some water in a shell, pronounced over them the sacramental words. They then moved away to make room for others, and Paulina withdrew to the interior grotto where Siona and her daughter had prepared garments to be worn by the newly baptised. Other neophytes followed in succession, then a short interval of silence ensued. Stephen and Hippolytus

were bending over the waters, in an attitude of intense supplication; and if ever the united prayer of great hearts could wring from the Lord an unwonted grace, surely this was the hour. Though the Pope was at all times a zealous Pastor, and the stray sheep he had brought into his Great Master's fold might be counted by hundreds, he had seldom felt so deeply the greatness of the function he was performing: "Lord of Israel," he said, praying aloud, "Thou wert great, when Thou didst lead Thy people of old, under a fiery cloud; greater still, when, clothed in mortal garb, Thou didst perform miracles for the children of men; both as Jehovah and as Jesus, there was in Thy heart a source of love that could never dry up; let it flow now on these poor pagans, show them such a proof of Thy Power as will speak to their senses, and draw many more to adore and worship Thee, the One True and Only God!"

He stretched his hand over the water that had been blessed already, invoked Him Who had so often chosen that element as an instrument of His mercies, then rose, no longer a suppliant, but gifted with the power of conferring grace in the name of the Most High. Two young girls presented themselves before him.

"Who are you?" asked the Pontiff in the usual catechetical form.

Volumnia and Lucilla gave in their names.

"Keep thy appellation, my child," said the Pontiff to Lucilla; "it forbodes a great grace which will be granted to thee this day. And thou, maiden," he continued, turning to Volumnia, "who hast been devoted from

childhood to a worship thou canst no longer lawfully pursue, place henceforth thy virginity under the guardian care of Mary the Spotless. Our great Mother will preserve thee from all harm, far more efficaciously than the Magna Mater of Rome. My children, approach, in order to be baptised."

The blind girl, clinging to her sister, descended with her into the font, where they stood upright, the water reaching only a little above their ankles, and hardly wetting the border of their white woollen *stolæ*. Flora was near them, outside the low wall ; she stooped and placed a hand on the shoulder of each sister, as their sponsor in the mystic rite. Volumnia pronounced aloud her act of renunciation of the gods of Rome, and, as the eldest, received baptism the first ; she then remained praying where she was, waiting for Lucilla. As the water fell on the blind girl, she uttered a low, trembling cry, the hand which held her sister's relaxed its hold ; an expression of astonishment and fear spread over her features and was mirrored in her eyes for the first time : she was no longer blind ! The first thing she saw was the water, which she stooped down to touch, as that was her way of realising all material objects.

Poor child ! she could not understand what had come over her : she felt as one who had arisen from the precincts of the tomb to the bright horizon of animated life ; yet the new sense was so strange and powerful that it seemed almost to annihilate her, and, closing her eyes again :

"What is this ?" she asked, "is it sight ? Oh,

Volumnia, guide me, teach me, I know not how to see ! ”

The next moment Nemesion was at her side, gazing in speechless rapture on the beloved child whom he folded in his arms. All came round her ; and that holy assembly, linked in brotherly charity, rejoiced with the tribune as if his daughter were indeed the child of all.

“ Let us pray ! ” exclaimed the Pontiff, hushing the chorus of sympathising voices ; “ let us magnify the Lord, for He has this day done great things amongst us, for the glory of His Name. Nemesion, thou didst come to this assembly with a blind-born pagan child, take away with thee a Christian daughter whose eyes have opened simultaneously to the light of day and to the light of God. Henceforth a task is assigned to thee and to her ; you must both spread the reign of truth wherever you go, and darkness can no longer abide wheresoever you dwell. Lucilla, small light kindled this day by a mighty love, thou must watch at thy father’s hearth, and where pagan gods once were worshipped burn thou the incense of Christian prayer.”

The young girl had left her father’s arms to kneel before the Pontiff. With the old instinct of blindness, she felt his feet before she stooped to kiss them. When she got up and looked round her, she stretched her arms towards the walls, which seemed to her to be falling down on her ; she breathed heavily, as with a sense of suffocation ; the new, undeveloped gift was overpowering her ; for, in her pupils, which till then had been lifeless, all surrounding objects were reflected with such

fearful vividness, that she fancied herself in close contact with all she saw, and felt oppressed at the thought that the persons around her were crushing her down, as the perception of distance was slow to fix itself on her untutored vision. She was fain to close her eyes again, and it was only when she felt herself borne, as of old, in the arms of those she loved, that she recovered her calm demeanour. Joyfully the Christian brethren surrounded her, giving her the kiss of peace. She was afraid to look at them, and only opened her eyes when reassured by the hallowing contact of her father's kiss; she threw her arms round him, as had been her custom during her blindness. He drew her to the lamp that, fixed in the wall, cast a glimmering light over that little assembly; he must see her more closely, that darling child whose recovery seemed to him as yet a dream, he gazed on her in speechless rapture, as her small, exquisitely formed hands scanned his features, as they had often done before; then she brought the fingers in contact with her eyes, as if to impart to these their new lesson; then fixing on him the orbs from which a whole life of concentrated love seemed to burst forth with the vigour of an unfolding existence: "I know you now!" she cried; and then, with the same groping but not ungraceful movements, she felt for the beloved form of her sister. "Volumnia," she said, "let me feel if you are such as I know you in my inmost soul."

She did not study those young features as she had done her father's, but with earnest gaze she drank in that mournful beauty which was now revealed to her

for the first time, and approached her forehead to those lips whose burning impression she had so often felt ; she stood entranced : “ Thus did I dream of you,” she said, “ thus my unerring heart had spoken true ! I knew you must be Light and Warmth ! ” The poor blind one gave to her idolised sister the names she had heard others apply to a sensation of happiness she had never known ; she understood all now ; how, in the night of her darkness, things of the external world had been revealed, and made as it were palpable to her mind ; for, in her moral world, where the heart alone saw and lived, Volumnia had been to her as the Light of Day.

Oh, the dawn of a new life ! whether of the senses or of the soul, who can speak of it but those who have risen to it from the shadows of the tomb !

The Christians were preparing to depart ; the candles and flowers on the altar had already been removed ; the Pontiff was unrobing, when Lucilla suddenly left her father’s arms, and, advancing a few steps :

“ Hark ! ” she cried, “ I hear a sound behind the projecting rock ; either one of us has left the assembly, or a stranger has passed in from without.”

They looked round and assured her that no one had either left or entered.

“ I heard,” she said, closing her eyes, as if thereby to render her hearing more acute, “ I heard the step of a man and that of a boy, but they are gone now . . . just gone ! May the God who hath redeemed us shield us from all harm ! ”

“ Amen ! ” echoed the Christians, fervently ; but they

attributed Lucilla's warning to the state of her feelings, wound up to the highest pitch on this solemn occasion.

Philip and his son passed out unheeded in the darkness, but they did not resume the Appian Way; they concealed themselves behind one of the tombs of the wayside until all the little assembly had dispersed. The boy wanted to know the cause of this mystery, but the father placed his hand upon his mouth, and would not allow him to speak till they had turned their steps homeward.

"Pooh!" said the little Philip, with a bitter tone; "a Caesar triumphant in the day-time, a skulking Caesar at night. I thought emperors should know no fear, father."

The too indulgent parent did not rebuke the youthful scorner, but drew towards him that son, at once his hope and his punishment, and made a mysterious sign on his forehead, repeating Lucilla's words:

"May the God who redeemed thee shield thee from all harm."

"What!" cried the youthful Caesar, vehemently, "dost thou speak like them? I thought we had watched them to accuse them to the judges."

"Hast thou understood what we saw?"

"'Twas an assembly of the Christians, the enemies of Rome; they will be punished according to law."

"Never while I live!" returned Philip, raising his hand with a solemn gesture. "Thou knowest not what thou sayest, little one; the imperial diadem is stained enough with crimes already, and it cannot sit safely on thy brow unless thou be baptised."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IT was past midnight, when the tribune Nemesion, parting from his friends at the Porta Carpentana, directed his steps towards his own abode, with his two daughters, whose weary steps he supported ; for the Christians were wont to go on foot to the Catacombs, the better to conceal their place of meeting from pagan knowledge. Lucilla, her father's constant companion in his outdoor life, was inured to fatigue, and would have borne up bravely, but this night's emotions had overtaken her excitable temperament, and the newly-acquired sensation of sight was so overpowering, that she felt like one who has rather lost an old existence than gained a new one ; she was fain to close her eyes, and thus preserve her power of hearing and contact, of which it seemed to her the exterior world would rob her. And poor Volumnia was fitted for much daring by a whole life of sacrifice, but this night she had reached the climax of her courage, and nothing but her new found peace of mind could have supported her, under the consciousness of the dread act she had accomplished. Severed from the gods of her childhood, a stranger as yet to her new creed, she felt that a great crisis was at hand, and wondered whether she could go through it : all was dark around her ; the night air, which she was not accustomed to, owing to

her being always enclosed in the temple's sacred precincts, now seemed to pass over her with a cold touch, like a presentiment of evil; her feet, used to tread the marble pavement of Vesta's fane, were bruised by this night's walking on the rough road; she was so weakened, exhausted, both in body and mind, that, when her father proposed to her to revisit her old home, and rest a little in her mother's arms, before he reconducted her to the temple, she longed to do so, but expressed a fear lest her absence might be discovered.

"Thou wilt make thyself ill, my child, unless thou takest some rest and restoratives immediately," he observed, anxiously. "Let thy mother tend thee but an hour or two, and I shall take thee back before day-break to the shrine, where they will not have missed thee yet."

"Let it be!" she replied; "all earthly joys were quenched in my poor heart so early, that it matters but little if my life be the price of an hour's brief return to the dreams of youth; take me to my mother."

And thus, in the dead of night, like a thief at her father's hearth, the poor girl crossed the threshold she had left in the bloom of childish beauty, when, prepared to be a bride, she had been chosen for the service of the cruel goddess; and her life had since then withered away, like a flower torn from its parent soil, not dying because endowed with innate vitality, but destined never to blossom more. At this hour, however, all sorrows were forgotten; she was under her father's roof; and Nemesis, issuing from the cubiculum where she awaited her lord's

return, rushed with extended arms to clasp to her heart her long-lost child. What matter if her husband had left her that night to embrace a creed whose tenets she would not share? At his own household altar, he was the high priest: what matter if he changed his gods! Lucilla had followed his example—the poor blind girl trod ever in her father's footsteps, but what of Volumnia? had Vesta discarded her? was it her apostacy that brought her back thus to her mother's arms? Oh, welcome then to the hearth of home! where a sacred fire is ever burning that requires no watching. Nemesia placed her daughter on a low couch, and composed her weary limbs to rest, as if only a few months had elapsed since she had nestled her in her arms. She had made no inquiries, nor even expressed any surprise, for love has its revelations that speak without a voice. While she was yet tending her long-lost darling, the Tribune, with whom anxiety for the one child and joy for the other's recovery were both paramount feelings, now brought forward Lucilla, and, placing her in her mother's arms: "Behold!" he cried, "the gods of Rome robbed you of a daughter, the God of the Christians restores to you this one, and lo! her eyes are open even as was the case with the man in the gospel, upon whom Jesus of Nazareth laid his hands!"

Lucilla scanned her mother's features as she had previously done her father's, and then applied her fingers to her eyes, that, seeing, they might understand. The miraculous transformation in her daughter was at first so appalling to Nemesia that she could not realise her

bliss. Her blind child was gazing on her! was it a dream? No! there was that innocent face over which she had so often hung in early childhood, hoping to find in its dawning intelligence a response to her own inquiring gaze; those eyes which had remained changeless when she wept over them, over which a veil had been drawn for so long, they looked at her now, with a love which atoned for long, speechless years! She clasped her hands, she dared not fondle that child, evidently a privileged one of the Unknown God, Who had marked her with His seal, but she fell on her knees, and raising her voice with a fervour she had never felt towards the gods of her country: "God of the Christians," she exclaimed, "Thou art great; I believe and confess Thy power: henceforth I shall place my trust in Thee alone!"

Thus, motherly love achieved the conquest of that heart which had resisted entreaties for so long; Lucilla's first work was done! she had won her mother!

"Time presses," resumed Nemesion; "turn all your thoughts for the present to Volumnia, whom I must remove from this place; attend to her, bring her to herself, and say all you would to her in the shortest time possible, for she must return to the temple, or her absence will be detected!"

"Why then did you restore her to me," cried Nemesia, "if it were but to tear her from me again? The gods have no need of her. You speak as a tribune, husband, urging obedience to the laws of Rome, you can be stern in your allegiance, for you know not a mother's

feelings. Ah, child! child!" she cried, bending over Volumnia's reclining form, "remember that I bore you, that this breast nourished you: obey me, then, when I bid you stay! No one need ever know where you have fled for safety; I can hide and shelter you from the avenging Roman law."

Volumnia, wearied by bodily fatigue, as well as worn out by previous mental conflict, was sinking into that involuntary slumber which kind nature affords as her best restorative: at the sound of her mother's voice she opened her eyes, but did not at first seize her meaning, which soon revealed itself in the fond caresses under which her whole frame thrilled with subdued emotion; just as in bygone days, she was leaning on that faithful heart, which had never been steeled to practise courageous virtue. The girl felt there was enervating influence in the contact, and, rousing herself effectually, she called to her aid the stern nature she had inherited from her father, and tried to disengage herself from Nemesis's embrace. "Mother, mother," she cried, "let me go! the Christian lessons of self-sacrifice and fidelity to duty must not be lost on us."

"You surely do not want to return to the false goddess you have renounced."

"No, mother, I serve her no longer!"

"What then do you seek at her temple?"

The girl did not answer: could she break that fond heart by communicating to it her own heroic resolution? could she tell her mother she was only returning to her country's altar in the expectation of finding there death

by declaring her faith ? Poor Nemesia could not have understood her, and the maiden forbore. She turned to her father, placed in his hand the veil which had effectually screened her from public gaze, the distinctive mark of Vesta's priestesses :

"When the time you have allotted for my staying within these walls shall have expired," she said, "return this to me, and I follow you at once."

"You shall not," returned Nemesia, growing more resolute when she found she was opposed ; "you must remain ; your father will take you in disguise to some distant province of the Empire, where you may live undiscovered for years. Until now you have never lived but in a tomb : open your heart to thoughts of happiness, child ; many years are before you ; you are free to enter the marriage state, and Icilius has remained faithful to you !"

"Hush ! hush !" cried the maiden, recoiling as from a dart whose touch she knew too well, "I know him no more, I know not what you say !"

"My child, do not carry your high principles even to sternness ; you have struggled with yourself long enough, and conquered nobly ; the time has come for you to embrace other and more cheerful duties—more in keeping with your age and sex. You can be a happy wife, even in exile. Better far a virtuous home abroad than the service of Vesta at a Roman altar !"

Poor Volumnia ! her head had sunk on her breast while she listened to the pleasant picture her mother's words portrayed. She raised her hand to her forehead,

where the swollen veins and throbbing temples told of intense mental agitation ; she remained silent, as if gazing on the fascinating vision thus conjured up. As she thus stood, a drop of water trickled down from her hair, yet moist with her late baptism ; she wiped it off reverently, and the current of her thoughts was in a moment totally changed. Was her Guardian Angel hovering over in that hour, exulting over his much longed for prize ? was he distilling heaven's choicest dew on that young brow, so fair in its first virgin innocence ? Volumnia remained silent, as if listening to the internal voice that spoke within her. Her noble nature, aroused, saw before her a future, awful to contemplate ; but there was heroism in fidelity to duty : she embraced it !

“ You tremble, my dear child,” continued her mother, more apt to divine the heart's struggles than to grasp the spirit's high resolves ; “ say but the word, my daughter, and——”

The look of tenderness with which Volumnia's loving eyes had remained fixed on her mother changed to one of fixed purpose.

“ Urge me no more, mother,” she said ; “ the daughter of a Roman tribune ought to esteem above all the priceless inheritance of an unblemished name. If I carried out what you propose to me, my conduct would be misunderstood. It would be supposed I had adopted a new religion as a cloak to favour an impious affection. Oh no ! let it not be said I left the altar of Vesta to become an unhallowed bride. Away ! better life-long

trials than the cloud of dishonour. Father, take me away while I am yet worthy of thee."

She took hold of her father's arm, placed it before her like a shield between herself and temptation; he pressed his lips to her brow with a feeling of reverence for her courage and purity, which enabled him to carry out her noble resolution. He covered her with her veil and bore her away in his arms, for she was exhausted by her own energy and had fainted away; she did not recover till they reached the temple of Vesta. Her father, afraid to profane the sacred precincts by crossing the threshold, pushed the door open, laid his daughter gently on the pavement, and whispered to her in a tone so deep as effectually to arouse her: "Arise, girl, the sacred fire is extinguished!"

A shriek burst on the air through the stillness of the night, so piercing and ominous, that the old Romans who lived near the temple wondered whether something supernatural were at hand, and the priestesses, awakened from their slumbers, assembled round the fane.

CHAPTER XXV.

IT was the eve of the Ides of April, and Rome's birthday—*Natalis Romæ* ! For several days previous to this, heralds had walked the streets, proclaiming that a thousand years had elapsed since the foundation of the Eternal City, and convening the people, by sound of trumpet, to prepare for the festival, which, celebrated but once in a century, had never been beheld by any then living, nor could ever be viewed by them again. The Quindecemviri had taken their post on the Capitol and Palatine, distributing among the crowds that daily flocked there, torches, sulphur and bitumen, wherewith to purify themselves for the approaching rite ; on the Aventine the people resorted to the temple of Diana, to receive a donation of wheat, barley and beans ; each family being abundantly supplied, in order to make their offering to the Parcæ in the night-time.

These preliminary observances being fulfilled, all awaited with anxiety the close of evening on the vigil of the *ludi sæculares*. The last rays of the sun trembled on the horizon, then sank behind the sea-like Campagna ; the short-lived Roman twilight began to envelop the land in a mysterious transparent obscurity ; the banks of the Tiber were thronged ; all Rome seemed to be following her Emperor, seeking the traces of the

cherished spot, so long revered as the cradle of her glory. Among the many things which pass away, and the great deeds whose memories expire, the *ficus ruminalis* had survived, as long as Roman virtue dwelt in stern old republican hearts: the tree, which had sheltered the baby brothers exposed to a watery grave, had flourished long after them, for hundreds of years. It was the pride of the nation to preserve its growth and ward off decay; but when truth, justice, and simplicity were no longer looked up to, when a proud palace almost covered the whole of the Mount Palatine, where the shepherd's cot once stood, the old tree withered, and, struck to the heart's core, died away.

A temple to Romulus marked and enclosed the site once occupied by the *ficus ruminalis*, and thither the Emperor Philip, with his son by his side, directed his steps, walking at the head of his people to open the festival. "Why did he not officiate as high priest, as was the wont of every Cæsar?" the people asked one of another, nor could they tell. After visiting by the river side the three rural altars, raised to the Parcæ, upon which three lambs were to be slain, he would not await the arrival of the priest, who was already in sight with his officiating ministers, but retired as he had come, bidding the people enjoy their holiday as best pleased them. He avoided coming in contact with the religious procession, and, even when the sound of their chaunts was borne onward by the evening breeze, he was observed to cover with a fold of his *paludamentum* the head of his little son, of that strange child associated to

him in the empire, and known among the people, as well as in the pages of history, as "*the boy who never smiled*". When the sacrifice was offered, and the *ludi sæculares* were declared to have begun, the people left the Tiber's banks for the Campus Martius, where, in one portion, known by the name of Tarentum, a theatre was erected, illuminated to such an extent that it was bright as day. Here people were already assembled to witness plays from Terence, which, contrary to the usual custom, were to be performed in the night-time. The chorus, a considerable body in the theatre of those days, not only sang, but performed evolutions and dances ; they were already ranged in the orchestra, the place generally assigned to them on the stage. No roof crowned the temporary edifice, built in wood, and gaudily gilt. The spectators, crowned with flowers for the festival, yet covered with the *læna* or woollen cloak, to shelter them from the night air, passed in, through the gallery underground, to the lowest benches, while an equal, if not a greater, number trod the exterior staircase leading to the seats above. The Ajax of Sophocles had been promised, but the Proscenium was as yet veiled, while the orchestra was occupied by the chorus. An enormous quantity of machinery had been brought from other theatres to this, which was more especially addicted to the secular games ; several unwieldy blocks and encumbrances had been left outside, as time had been wanting to range and conceal them : there were the Charon steps by which the Shades ascended from the lower world to the stage, the mecha-

nical contrivance by which gods and heroes were represented floating through the air—hence the expression *Deus ex machina*. The performance was not yet ready, which gave the citizens time to exchange some humorous remarks.

“Not so fast! not so fast, friends!” cried one largely built man proceeding to his place with all the leisure his obesity required, and was rather a hindrance to the pleasure-loving citizens who, hurrying on past him, trod pretty freely on his toes. “Not so fast! have mercy on one whom the gods have not endowed with the same swiftness of limb as yourselves.”

“But you will hold two places, friend.”

“I know that, and have already paid for them, but help me up, or I may roll down to the row where the Ephebi sit.”

“Then you will rise in dignity by that fall.”

“Nay! you are pleasant, friend, come and sit near me; I shall try to squeeze my fat limbs to make room for you; I love those of the glib tongue, and have no one to talk to to-night.” So saying, he spread out his cloak, and flattened out the cushion he had brought with him to cover the stone seat.

“Ah! I recognise you now,” exclaimed the new comer; “Marcus Publius, I salute you; but how comes it I meet you alone? You are wont to be a jovial companion at many a revel, how have you found your way here all by yourself?”

“Well! I don’t give as many banquets as I used, and that is perhaps one reason why my popularity is

somewhat on the wane ; I love philosophy now more than drinking-cups ; 'tis rather late to discover that I was really born to be a man of letters. A great pity I was not told that in my youth, for I'd have become a favourite with the Muses had I only courted them earlier. However, I have quite taken to study, and was even an hour ago roused up from my books by the noise and din of the chorus of citizens going to the Capitol, and the voice of the criers proclaiming the *ludi sæculares*. I like that in our Emperor, this solemn keeping of Rome's birthday."

"Tut, Marcus ! we all know what these games mean ; true, 'tis Rome's thousandth Natalis ; but she needed a palliative to soften down the accession of her new sovereign ; a man can do no wrong who thus lavishes his money on the people."

"Speak lower ! we ought to be accustomed to ambition by this time ; the days are long gone by when it was accounted a crime in a Roman."

"I could forgive a revolt, for that is a sudden outburst of passion, but Philip's treacherous deeds are the result of long previous meditation. Mithras' death was strange ; many think he was poisoned."

"That rumour never reached me ; I have been so busy with my books."

"And, while studying ancient history, you know nothing of modern. The new Cæsar fitted into his post very cleverly : early practised in the art of war, he knew how to win the favour of the soldiers, and sought to alienate them from Gordianus : a dearth of provisions

was felt in the army, which Philip turned to his advantage, persuading the soldiers it originated with the Emperor ; meanwhile, he himself prevented the arrival of food, and also the payment of arrears to the troops, proving and explaining everywhere that Gordianus was too young to bear the weight of government."

"That was true in one sense, for Misisheus governed for him, and youth is a drawback, as I know from experience ; I had very little judgment when I was young."

The friend received this with a grunt of assent, which, if expressed in words, might have proved little flattering, then proceeding with his narrative :

"The suggestion gained ground with the soldiers that a general of more experience would prove more beneficial to the army and the 'throne, than Gordianus. Insensibly, and by degrees, he grew to share his authority, and treated the Cæsar with such haughtiness that the latter one day assembled his troops, complained to them of the insolence of his colleague, and enjoined them to deprive him of his power. Philip, on the other hand, putting aside all shame, assembled his partisans, and proclaimed himself Emperor. Gordianus, finding himself abandoned by all, with nothing to look forward to but treachery, was reduced to implore the mercy of his sometime Præfect, offering to share the purple with him ; subsequently he himself was treated simply as Præfect, and would most likely have been obliged to accept the post of captain, but Philip had gone too far in iniquity to stop there ; he remembered

how Gordianus was loved, not only in Rome but also in Africa and all subject provinces, alike for his personal goodness and the race from which he derived his birth ; he murdered him ! ”

“ Oh ! ” burst forth the good-natured Marcus Publius, sobbing like a child ; “ I had not heard the details of this dreadful story ; it is too much for my feelings as a man, and my sense of honour as a Roman. Ye gods ! what a loss in every way ! a man who loved letters so much, that in his library were found collected 62,000 volumes.”

“ That, methinks, is very little to the purpose ; weep, rather, that we have lost in him a second Trajan, the Father of his people, under whose reign no Roman ever had to complain of injustice.”

“ I do ! I do mourn for him,” replied the fat man with increasing energy ; “ he was the best and fairest Rome ever saw. I think, friend, we ought not to assist at these games, but withdraw as a sign of mourning to our homes.”

“ Such scruples are ill-timed ; all our games have a sacred origin and form part of our religious feasts. It is a falling away from the customs of our ancestors that has introduced levity on the stage.”

This was enough for Publius ; he sat down and forgot his late emotion in the beauty of the spectacle which rapidly unfolded before him. The Tarentum was gorgeously lit up ; the chorus, which acted a great part in these feasts, and had that day gone to the Capitol in procession to visit Jupiter, now opened the performance

by hymns to Diana and Apollo; after which the poetical recitations began, interspersed by music. Over the heads of the spectators the sky was growing rapidly of a deeper blue, which soon was lost in darkness ; the stars, one by one, peeped forth in the veiled night, as if mingling in the great Roman festival, but the air was balmy, and brought with it a sense of rest. The stage, yet in its infancy, was suited to the simple requirements of the people ; the actor being seen at a great distance, and not standing on an inclined plane as in our days, was obliged to use very high sandals to increase his height, hence the expression *induere cothurnum* ; moreover, it was necessary on account of his acting in the open air that his voice should be aided so as to reach the public, and he wore a mask which covered his head entirely ; from the mouth, shaped like a trumpet, his voice issued with threefold power. This huge pasteboard mask served for another purpose ; it wore a sad or a merry countenance, according to the genius of tragedy or comedy it was intended to represent. Frequently one actor had to play the part of two personages, and he used to have each side of his pasteboard face painted differently beforehand ; thus he would sometimes present a youthful, sometimes an aged profile to the public, who were quite satisfied with this awkward device, for the more or less graceful action of a performer, or indeed acting at all, was not the scope of the stage, which rather consisted in declamation and poetical recitation, and the people had a keen relish for each joke of the buffoon, each poetical beauty of the

author ; they laughed immoderately when the vices of the times were cleverly held up to ridicule, for in those days Horace's *Castigat ridendo mores* was more than an epigram.

Night came on, the air grew chilly, the good citizens donned the *læna* or woollen cloak which effectually protected them against the dew, but no one thought of leaving, so interested were they in the drama, until the very last actor had played his part, and then they sallied forth to witness a sight Rome seldom presented—an illumination on both sides of the Tiber. It is impossible for us, accustomed to the well lighted streets of our modern capitals, to realise the feelings of dazzled surprise with which a Roman surveyed the magnificent perspective, the reproduction in fiery lines of light of those edifices which he loved so well ; the temple of Concord which he had left on the Forum, the Arch of Titus, the Ara Cœli were all transported here, as if by a magic creation shining with a new, ethereal, transparent lustre ; it was surpassingly beautiful to gaze on that magic creation as it twinkled, flashed, nay almost breathed under the night air, now fanned into greater vividness, now on the wane, now lit up again. As far as the eye could reach all was fantastic brightness : here arose artificial towers of light, there pyramids reared their glowing summits, tapering upwards gracefully from a fiery basis, and, as they were reflected in the stream below, old Tiber presented the appearance of a flood of light ; here no sound was heard but the singing of those who went to offer sacrifice, and the idle murmur of

daily talk was hushed by the solemn magnificence of the scene. Illuminations in general partake more of a religious than of a joyous character, perhaps because they consort so calmly with the stillness of nature at that hour: they denote a triumph, it is true, but calm, serene, unstruggled for, and although earthly they look like a reflection of that silent, luminous work the Majesty of Heaven is doing in the vault above. And thus the people walked on either side of the river in solemn enjoyment, in festive robes, and hushed converse.

The second morning arose of the three days devoted to the *ludi sæculares*, and this was the matrons' feast. They presented a fair sight, all ranged in procession, attired in gaudy robes, singing hymns to the gods; they ascended slowly to the Capitol, and went to visit the temple of Juno.

Scarce were they fairly out of sight than the people had to gaze on another glorious spectacle. This was the *pompa* which announced the opening of the Circus: first came the boys, a little under or about the age of fourteen, when they were considered to be Roman citizens, and capable of taking part in public acts: all those who would be called upon to serve the Republic as foot soldiers walked in rank and file, while those whose fathers were *equites* rode on either side like the wings of an army; thus could the lookers-on judge of the beauty and strength of these youths—the flower of Rome. Behind them followed the *aurigæ* or charioteers, each attended by a party wearing their colours: the *gens*

albata, white; *russata*, red; *prasina*, green, and *veneta*, blue; next came the *athletæ* or gladiators, followed by the dancers, divided into three bands: the first, comprising such as had reached man's estate; the second, youths; the third, little boys. They wore purple tunics and bronze belts, with short swords and lances.

Dancing was considered a religious ceremony with the ancients, for they thought it meet that the body should honour the gods. At the head of each band was a leader who indicated the movements and rhythm, so that their steps fell in perfect cadence with the sound of the *tibiæ* and *lyræ*, played by the musicians who walked on each side of them. Other musical instruments came in the rear, surrounding portable altars, on which incense and perfumes burned all along the road. Behind these again appeared another group, carrying in their hands all the gold and silver vessels used in the temples, and last of all, the statues of the gods were borne on men's shoulders, surrounded with their symbols or with the representation of some invention or gift with which they had benefited mortals: there were, first, the twelve great gods and the twelve parent divinities—Saturn, Rhea, Themis, Latona, the Parcæ, Mnemosina, &c., as well as all those to whom temples had been erected; next in order came all the gods and goddesses who were supposed to have come into existence after Jupiter, such as Proserpine, Lucina, the Nymphs, the Hours, &c.; these were followed by the heroes and demi-gods; all the orders of priests and sacrificators bringing up the rear. It was a long and glorious display, and

the people unanimously testified their admiration ; the Capitoline Hill literally swarmed with the pious adherents of the gods, the ruggedness of its rocky sides disappeared, as if covered with a living tapestry of human figures and gorgeous vestments, while the sounds of sacred music awoke all the undying echoes of the past. Slowly they proceeded towards the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, where the officiating priest entered alone and performed the sacrifice; then, issuing from the portals, they wended their way down the Forum, through the Vicus Tuscus and Velabrum, to the Circus Maximus; there, too, the road was lined by an uninterrupted throng, for it had at all times been a favourite place of resort for that people, whose love of pleasure so absorbed every other feeling that, in these degenerate days, a poet accused the Romans of knowing but one craving hunger, *Panem et Circenses*.

The place must besides have been looked upon as consecrated by historical memories, for it was here that Romulus had found brides for his followers ; here were performed the first games that brought Sabine maidens to Rome. In later days, the Roman kings had enclosed the place, and each embellished it more than his predecessor had done, until it grew to be the largest of the many amphitheatres in Rome, hence its name of Circus Maximus. Its range of steps was divided into three storeys, each sheltered by a covered gallery. Round the arena ran a small canal called Euripus, which, with a view to the safety of the spectators, separated them from the combatants. The edifice, injured by time and

burned down more than once, had risen always greater from its ruins, until it had grown capable of containing thousands of spectators, and its exterior circumference, clothed in marble, presented such regularity that it looked like a succession of temples. The Emperor no longer occupied, as heretofore, an enclosed *suggestum*, but was placed higher up above all his subjects, so that all eyes could gaze on him. By this means more space had been gained for the lookers on. The Circus was oblong, a shape necessitated by the nature of the games ; the arena being circumscribed by two straight lines in its length, and two curves in its breadth, the east curve being a perfect semicircle uniting the two straight lines, the west curve a circle whose centre was one established point ; and thus the charioteers, starting from a given centre, all went through the same space, although in a curve. *Carceres* was the name given to the place where the chariots and horses were held back till the moment of starting. In this space were thirteen low doors closed by iron gates, the centre one used only by the officiating priests ; the six to the right and six to the left were flung open the moment the races began on the signal being given by a white cloth falling to the ground. At the angle of each door was a little tower, on which stood the *tibicini* or flute players, and before each a Hermes, as is still to be seen from the ruins existing to this day. The commencement and the terminus of the race-course were determined by *metæ*, large stones of a cone-like shape, surmounted by oval balls, which the victor bore away with him on the

point of his spear at each race he won. A white cord, *linea alba*, was extended from one *podium* to the other, and the chariots were not allowed to throw each other down till they had passed this boundary. A low, long ridge, bearing the name of *Spina*, divided the whole Circus longitudinally. It was not quite straight, but a little inclined so as to leave more space on the right. It served as a base for different statues, and, being hollow within, it was also used as a receptacle for water, thus serving continually to wash the axle wheels, which, being of wood, were apt to be set on fire by friction. Three small obelisks, surmounted by dolphins spouting water, served as fountains to aliment the canal, and at the same time as winning terminus, for the purport of the race consisted in running seven times round the enclosure. Each victor might mark his course by seizing on one of the seven little pillars, loosely fixed on the summit of the column. Sometimes eggs figured there instead; nor were these symbols without a meaning, the dolphins alluding to Neptune and the eggs to Castor, divinities to whom horses were in a special manner dedicated.

Among the statues erected on the *Spina* were three of bronze, representing Ceres, Bacchus, and Proserpine. They are mentioned by Pliny as having been made in the year 556 by Acilius Glabrion and Caius Lelius with the produce of the taxes. Three altars were erected, one before each of these divinities; besides these, smaller *sacelli* bore the statues of Venus Murcia, and one underground was dedicated to Consus. Neptune was known

under this name when invoked as the god who hid the divine counsels, and for this reason Romulus had dedicated to him the games called *Consualia*. The god's secret altar was disinterred from under the earth that concealed it each time a sacrifice had to be offered. The procession entered by the middle gate, distinguished as the *porta pompæ*, made the round of the Circus, offered the sacrifice to the god Consus, and the games were opened.

There was a new spectacle of an extraordinary kind which had been long preparing. For days and weeks the workmen employed in the Circus Maximus had gathered together in great numbers, and the soldiers, but just returned from the Eastern campaign, had joined them, sharing their labours with the same energy they had displayed in hewing down trees and building up mounds of earth in the long defensive war they had been engaged in. The completion of the work now far surpassed all the Roman citizens' expectations, and they clapped their hands for joy. In the place of the well-trodden arena, which Nero's extravagant profusion had once caused to be spread with minium and gold dust, there was to be seen now fresh earth brought from the woods, apparently covering the lower part of trees which had been dug up from their very roots and planted there, and, strange to say, their branches were fresh and green, affording a pleasant shade ; nor was this all, the magic forest was already peopled by those animals whose nature it is to seek such protection : a thousand ostriches, a thousand stags, together with

wild goats and sheep, revelled in the luxuriant foliage ; animals too, brought from the East by Philip on his return from the wars, consorted with those of an inferior species, and paced the enclosure. At a given signal, the people were admitted to enjoy the pleasures of the chase, and each was allowed to take to his own home the easy prey he had caught. Such munificence had never been heard of before ; it was a more delicate way of gratifying the citizens than by throwing *sestertia* among them, a coarse donation which emperors had been in the habit of making. Philip's good taste and refinement were, on this occasion, lauded to the skies. And now, while preparations were being made for the chariot races, the animals that yet remained were driven into the central enclosure, a sufficient space being reserved for the accustomed races ; and the citizens, who had all risen during the sacrifice, now gravely resumed their seats in expectation of the games. First came the race of the *quadrigæ*, or chariots with four horses, and immense excitement pervaded all ranks, for, if betting was not in those days, as in ours, the besetting sin of the spectators, it is certain that the intense interest taken by different parties in the winning colour often gave rise to serious conflicts. The blue and green colours were generally the most popular among the lower orders. This people, methodical and religious, even in the midst of pleasure, had fixed rules for the course the chariots were to pursue. The *quadrigæ* were followed by the *bigæ*, or chariots for two horses, with one pole, of which specimens are to

be seen in the Vatican Museum. The chariots issued from twelve gates, in allusion to the twelve months of the year and the signs of the zodiac ; they turned seven times round the *meta*, even as there are seven days in the week. There was ever a sacred idea predominant in these games, as may be deduced from the fact of their being represented on many a sarcophagus, or perhaps this was because they were a fit image of the course of human life, and of the arena on which so many battles are fought and won, of the difficulties that beset our path, and the palm for which we are struggling. Sometimes the *triga* races, with three horses, succeeded to the above-mentioned. The men were always dressed lightly, in short vests bound with leather, instead of a corslet, so as to be protected in case they fell ; for the same motive, they wore a helmet, and each carried, well sheathed in the leathern stripes of his vest, a curved knife, so as to cut the reins if the chariot were reversed, and thus extricate himself. These divers evolutions had been well and successfully performed, and the people now awaited with impatience the course of the *equi desultori* ; but their entrance was delayed, for the Emperor, who, contrary to custom, had given orders that the games should begin without him, was now just on the point of entering the theatre, and the cries without told the people within to arise and applaud him. Every sound was hushed in anxious expectation ; the spectators held their breath to listen ; the silence was so complete that the clatter of the horses' hoofs was heard on the road as the Prætorian

guard accompanied and preceded the Cæsar. He came in his triumphal robes on foot, holding by the hand his little son, whom he had made his partner in the Empire. The storm of applause rose high. "*Populus Imperatori,*" they cried; "*Dominus es, primus es, omnium felicissimus vincis, ab ævo vincis!*"

Philip, surrounded by a brilliant retinue, went to take the place which, as we before explained, was uncovered, and built in advance of the seats; shouts of joy continued to greet him. Pleased at the tribute, he turned round to watch if it produced any effect on his son, who remained immovable, as was the wont of "the boy who never smiled". A sigh escaped Philip, and he sat down. There was one behind him on whom that sigh was not lost. Decius, the friend and counsellor of the throne, less bred to warfare than his master, was useful to the latter, who, new to power, understood the battle field better than the mysteries of legislation.

"My lord and master comes late to the games," observed the courtier. "Your majesty did not assist at the *pompa* that preceded them, nor at the opening sacrifice."

Philip started involuntarily, then, endeavouring to compose his features, merely answered: "This has been a fatiguing day".

"And would Cæsar court rest? he did not preside at the sacrifices offered yesterday to the *Parcæ*!"

"I am but a warrior, Decius, and ill-accustomed to pomp."

"The Emperor's most glorious function is that of

Pontifex Maximus," replied the other, with a scarcely perceptible smile of triumph, for he had suspicions of his own which were gaining ground.

Philip could not see the expression of his face, which did not escape his son: "What is the drift of these ill-timed questions and observations?" asked the boy, with stern coldness.

Decius did not answer; he felt himself over-reached, but he now clearly saw the Emperor was a Christian.

Again the *carceres* are closed, and the people full of expectation; the horses are pawing the ground and snorting behind the barriers. The Emperor gives the signal, and the noble animals bound forward, free, unbridled, plunging their hoofs in the arena, they throw a shower of sand on each other, till they become almost invisible; at last, panting, breathless, foaming, after revolving seven times round the course, they reach the goal. Next came the *ludi Troici*, or evolutions performed by youths of different ages, so graphically described by Virgil in the Fifth Book of the *Æneid*.

And now, the last and most interesting part of the spectacle was at hand; the sand had been renewed and refreshed; all eyes turned to the artificial wood, where the animals had taken refuge during the previous entertainment, and the chase commenced. The sounds of a lyre were heard, and Orpheus appeared, issuing from the trees, charming the wild beasts by music. The pacific aspect of the scene was soon altered, when hunters, exciting the animals with their spears, brought them forth in the arena; the *venatores*, magnificently dressed

and armed, some with arrows, some mounted, others on foot, all displayed considerable art and courage. There were animals of all kinds, both dangerous and innocuous, but as the trees provided them with a refuge, the games were less sanguinary than usual; novelty, however, was a sufficient compensation. An anecdote is mentioned in the account of these feasts, of a hare, which, pursued by dogs, after vainly trying to escape by running several times round the arena, took refuge in the jaws of a lion, and remained there unhurt, finding more safety with that generous animal than when delivered up to man's inhuman love of pleasure. It was a varied scene, now partly concealed from view, now exposed in all its ferocious interest; at one moment the *venator* seemed to be falling a prey to the beast he had excited, then suddenly escaped from his grasp, shifted him off to one of his companions and resumed the attack on another side. How many distant provinces had furnished these beasts of their forests, and how they spoke of the far extended empire of Rome! There were the bears of Caledonia, the lion of Numidia, the tiger of Persia, the rhinoceros of India, all these were tributes from her provinces, or from those who feared her name. The chase did not, however, continue to extermination, for, as the people knew, this pastime was left for them to share in, after the termination of the games. Again the beasts were driven back to their enclosure, and now came the turn of the gladiators. First appeared the pugilists, who, armed solely with gauntlets, exerted all their muscular strength against each other; then the *retiarii*,

of whom one, provided with a net, sought to entrap his adversary, who lay thereby at his mercy; the *Samnites*, wearing the ancient costume of Samnium. These were followed by combatants on horseback, the *Andabatae*, who wore their visors lowered; the *Dimachæri*, known by their two short swords; the *Laqueatores*, who flung a noose round their adversary; the *Essedarii* closed the list of combatants: they mounted a chariot *essedum*, of Gallic or of British origin. By this time the fight had assumed fearful proportions: blood had already mingled with the sand of the arena, and more than one gladiator lay writhing in the dust. Again and again the spectators had arisen with their thumbs firmly pressed, a sign that the disabled man must be despatched, and then nothing remained for him but to stretch out his limbs gracefully, and receive the last blow according to the rules of art. At this juncture, the excitement was so intense, that the disappearance of Cæsar from the royal seat was not noticed, save by his immediate attendants. When the gladiators first came forward, he had been observed to turn away his head; he remained watching the features of his son, who, as the sight proceeded, seemed to be overcome with disgust.

“Thou lovest not these shows?” asked the father.

“No! they sicken me!”

Immediately Philip arose, taking him by the hand: “Our son is young,” he observed apologetically to those who surrounded them; “he loves not blood-shedding; I shall take him away quietly”.

Decius smiled again.

They went on to where the Tiber rolled, and where the illumination reflected in its waters afforded a more innocent pastime ; as on the preceding nights spiral columns arose, and fanciful palaces burning brightly against the dark sky. Philip and his son mingled unnoticed in the crowd. Presently there was a sound of music and singing, which drew nearer and nearer ; youths and maidens, gaily dressed and crowned with flowers, formed a procession in which the mysterious number three was nine times multiplied ; they were the flower of Rome, youths and virgins coming to sacrifice to their native gods on the very spot where had once stood the cradle of Romulus. The Emperor clasped more tightly the little hand that was locked in his, and walked quickly out of reach of the procession, till they reached the foot of the Aventine hill ; there, too, the banks of the Tiber were lit up, but less brightly, for it was at a distance from the Forum ; here trees had grown undisturbed, forming into a wood, shady and pleasant in the daytime, but not thick enough to be dark. Even in this retired spot there was a pretty tent tastefully decorated with lights and garlands in harmony with the day's festival, and provided with refreshments for such quiet folks as wished to avoid the boisterous merriment of the thoroughfares below : it had indeed been prepared by a Christian family, to screen their brethren who might be remarked if they absented themselves altogether from the feast, and yet could not conscientiously assist at the public games or processions. Philip, who yearned for solitude, remained with his son at some distance from

the pavilion, and sat down on the trunk of a tree that had been felled.

“ Art cold ? ” he asked.

“ Why care you so much for me, father ? If I am to be a soldier and go to battle, I must learn to be strong and brave ! ”

Philip sighed at the sturdy answer. True ! it were well that this boy were courageous as a Cæsar ought to be, but when the full tide of paternal affection finds, while rushing on, a stone in its way, how painfully it returns gurgling to its source. “ Perhaps he is destined to be my punishment,” thought the Emperor. “ Even so, my God, I have deserved it, but let him be shielded from harm ! ”

A party of friends engaged in converse now entered the wood, looking out for an elevated spot whence they might embrace the general view of the mighty festival. The Tribune, Nemesion, and his friend, Adrias, walked first, behind them their wives, engaged in conversation. They were followed by two young girls, each leading a little child ; the maidens were silent, but the children prattled, as is the wont of those little creatures, who, having no part to play in life, love to hear their own merry voices chiming in with the external hubbub of nature, whose outspoken language is too deep for them to understand. “ Maria, do come and take my hand,” whispered the little boy to his sister ; “ I am afraid of Lucilla, she clasps me so, as if she knew not how to walk, and were afraid of falling.”

“ ’Tis so with her ever since her eyes have been

opened to the light," observed the little girl; "but do not let go her hold, that would be unkind, she might think you do not love her, and you know she is unhappy."

The child gave utterance to the feelings of her own good heart yet fresh from the grace of baptism.

The friendship between Flora and Lucilla had grown more intimate since the latter had recovered her sight; they had so much in common now that they found happiness in the One source of all good. Lucilla had not heeded the remarks of her little charge; she seemed to be watching intently some object that absorbed her, and startled Flora by asking her to take the children to their mother, as she wished to speak to her alone, and the little people gladly ran to their parents, who were now resting in the tent. When Flora came back she found her friend standing under a tree, pressing her hands on her eyes, an attitude she was wont to assume when listening attentively.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"This is a strange coincidence; I heard just now the steps of two strangers whose presence I fear is ominous of danger to our brethren. I recognised them because I heard them the night of my baptism."

"What do you mean? Or perhaps I had better not ask you; we may be overheard."

"No! we are safe now. My ear, well practised during long years of darkness, recognises easily a sound it has once heard. Do you remember my telling you, that night, that strangers were by, for I heard a tread which

was not your father's nor mine, nor that of the officiating priest? You would not believe me, and when I prayed the God of Christians to preserve us from all harm, you thought I was deluded by a passing sensation of fear. I did not explain; for the sensation of sight was so new to me, that I did not know how to give objects their appropriate names; it seemed to my unpractised eyes that two figures were standing in a cavity of the rock, so hollow that no light fell upon them, and no one saw them but myself; by and by they grew, as it were, detached from the wall. I saw their living faces and heard their steps receding in the sand. They were a man and a boy; it was not till long after that I understood all this, and was able to connect the circumstances, which I had almost forgotten till just now all returned to me, when I heard the same footfall."

"Oh, Lucilla, then we are tracked! Why did you not tell me this sooner? What shall we do? Let me go and warn our parents!"

"Be silent and calm! I hear those steps again; they are returning this way. If you show alarm, we may endanger our friends' safety."

Flora trembled from head to foot; but sat down passively, with her friend, on a bench outside the pavilion; they waited some time, for Lucilla's hearing was so acute, that she could discern the approach of persons long before they came in sight. When at last the strangers appeared, the maidens recognised, to their utter amazement, the imperial *laticlavium* and the Phrygian cloak of Tyrian dye, worn by Rome's Cæsar

and Augustus. They drew near, as if willing to be addressed, and the light of a coloured lamp, fixed in a neighbouring tree, fell on features which were easily recognisable from the numerous medals struck on the occasion of this day's feast. The young girls immediately warned Nemesion, who, drawing aside the curtains of the tent, displayed to view his little family party; they knelt down before the Emperor according to the court ceremonial. Philip in the most gracious manner begged of them to rise, and, as he extended his hand to them each in turn, his fingers came in contact with a ring which Flora wore rather loosely, and which seemed to be near slipping off.

"Maiden, you are too trustful," he said laughing; "you will lose this, and throw temptation in the way of thieves. Your ring is of great beauty," he continued, "and of curious workmanship."

Flora took it off at once, presenting it to the Emperor for examination.

He took it to the light; it was a very precious stone, bearing engraved on it a small head, perfectly designed. At the sight of it, a strange expression passed over Philip's countenance, and he asked, in a hollow voice: "Who are you, and whence had you this?"

Flora looked round at Nemesion anxiously, who answered for her in a quiet, respectful tone: "This maiden, by name Flora, is the daughter of my late lamented friend Florentius; that ring was given her by the Emperor Gordianus, in remembrance of a special favour he granted her."

"He was a noble master," observed Philip. "No one has more cause to mourn his death than I. Have you any request to make of me, Flora?" he continued; "I would fain benefit such as he favoured."

The young girl this time consulted Adrias by a look of enquiry, for the subject she had most at heart was one she could not well speak of before Nemesion or his family. The Tribune understood this himself, and promptly withdrew with all his party, leaving the tent unoccupied but by the royal visitors, Adrias, and Flora.

"Cæsar," she began at once, in answer to his previous question, "pardon a girl who addresses thee with untaught simplicity; my companion, the daughter of the Tribune Nemesion who has just left, tells me you met us already, a few nights ago, on the Via Appia; if so, will you keep our secret, and protect us from our enemies?"

The Emperor had felt overcome at the sight of that ring, which aroused the remorse that gnawed continually at his conscience, and, by a strange anomaly of the human heart, he felt disposed to respect and confide in the girl who revered the memory of his victim; he did not, however, answer her immediately, for his little son drew him back, whispering: "Let it not be known, my lord father, that an Emperor can go about skulking in the dark."

Philip did not heed him, contrary to his wont.

"I recognise you," he said, addressing Flora again. "I saw another young friend of yours recover her sight;

I understood all that passed that night, but fear not, under my reign the Christians shall suffer no harm."

"And wherefore?" asked the boy at his side, in a low, almost a muttered tone.

"Because there has been blood spilt enough already, child; more sinfulness might draw down misfortunes on *thy* head, which I would fain avert! Will you," he continued, turning to Adrias, "bear this message to your friends, that they have every assurance of protection from Philip? All I ask of them in return is that they pray for the safety of my son."

"No!" cried the boy, "I forbid that; I scorn their prayers."

"Alas!" sighed the father, "he belongs to a race which owns an uncurbed spirit, both in its sons and its fiery steeds. Nature has showered on Arabia gifts which turn to poison if not wisely handled; there is in the riches of her soil and the nature of her children a wild luxuriance, which, if not brought to bear fruit early, must turn to evil." His voice sank to a whisper as he added, "and the rank weeds leave behind them a harvest of remorse."

Adrias himself felt pity at the self-reproach these words implied, and endeavoured to give the conversation another turn.

"If the Tribune Nemesion withdrew from this august presence a few minutes ago," he explained, "it was because I asked him to do so in order that we might solicit your pardon and protection for his daughter."

"I have already offered and promised a favour to this noble maiden who wears the ring of Gordianus."

"Then, Cæsar," exclaimed Flora, "grant me this, which I shall value more than any personal gift: among the Christians you saw a few nights ago engaged in a sacred rite was the elder daughter of Nemesion, Volumentia, a Vestal priestess. Her absence from the temple was discovered; it was ascribed to a motive unworthy of her, and this imputation, coupled with a former accusation equally unfounded, has caused her to be imprisoned on suspicion, and she now awaits her judgment. Save her, great sovereign!"

"Oh! how can I? I too must bow before the laws of Rome!"

"Philip," entreated the young girl, holding up her ring; "it was precisely in a similar circumstance Gordianus delivered her from an unjust sentence. Has this pledge remained in my hands in vain?"

He seemed much distressed: "I cannot proclaim her innocence, though to me it is as clear as day; I should bring ruin on my own head without benefiting her."

"If you cannot save her directly," again urged Flora, "think of some way in which you may do so indirectly. If you show mercy, so will Gordianus plead for you before your Judge and his."

He covered his face with his hands, as if the shade she had evoked stood even then before him; then he resumed in a calm and subdued tone: "A strange plan occurs to me, but it would require a very devoted person to execute it."

"Nothing shall be spared," cried both Adrias and Flora at once; "there are many who would risk their lives without a thought to save our dear sister."

"How Christians love each other!" uttered Philip in a scarce audible whisper; then, taking the tablets at his side, he traced thereon a few distinct characters with a rough sketch illustrating his meaning, which he held towards the petitioners. They understood immediately and uttered a cry of joy, which he checked: "Let this be a profound secret," he said, and he at once effaced the marks by applying the other end of his *stylus*.

"I am a father," he continued, as if with a view to justify and explain his yielding to their entreaties, "and my best hopes are here:" he put his hand on his son's head, and parting the hair which fell thickly on his low forehead: "Are there any among your brethren who have the gift of prophecy?" he asked; "fain would I ask whether this little one is to have a long and happy life."

Involuntarily Flora fixed her gaze on that low forehead, stamped with a strangely-stern concentrated expression, ill-suited to the childish features; the boy was handsome, but of that cast of regular beauty observed on the busts of Nero in his childhood; she shuddered at the analogy.

"Wilt pray for him?" again urged the Emperor.

"Ay, that his life may be long spared, if he use it to the glory of Rome and his own eternal happiness, otherwise" . . .

"Otherwise?" repeated Philip after her, anxiously.

“A short life and an unsullied name, Cæsar, are preferable to the purple.”

She checked herself and trembled, for her words seemed to convey a mute reproach; but Philip had been too much softened by consorting with one of his own faith to feel even a passing emotion of anger.

“The truth has fallen from thy lips unwittingly; verily, thou art right. Pray, then, that an undefiled conscience may be his portion. Pray,” he added in a whisper, “that my crime may not be visited on his innocent head.”

The girl pressed her lips to the imperial hand, and Philip, as he withdrew it, felt his pardon had begun, for he bore away with him the tear of her Christian pity.

“I must leave you,” he said; “it is the penalty of my position to live for ever in public. I enjoin upon you the strictest silence with regard to this interview. I except your immediate relations and the Christian Pontiff; tell him I ask to be prayed for as one without a name. Our God is merciful, is he not?”

“His Name is Infinite Mercy,” interposed Adrias reverently. “The psalms we sing in our assemblies were written by a king who had grievously offended, and yet his garments were washed whiter than snow.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Philip, with a sigh of relief, “and he is better known even by his penance than by his crime. Yes, David was the man after God’s own heart, but”—here he hesitated—“his favourite son Absalom met with an awful fate. Ah, that I could obtain the pardon of him who sleeps in the desert!

Methinks I see his grave : it is on the confines of Persia ; it bears an inscription in Latin, Persian, Hebrew, and Egyptian : ‘To the divine Gordianus, the victor of the Persians, the Goths, and Sarmatians. He extended the Roman Empire, and conquered the Germans, but not the Philippi,’—that alludes to his having been conquered by the Alanni on the plains of Philippi ; but I, who saw therein a double meaning, let it stay ; may it serve as the confession of a crime, as an expiation.”

As he spoke, a cry burst the stillness of the night air—shrieks remote, far sounding, the concentrated yell of a thousand voices ; the horizon grew suddenly illumined, the air was traversed with forky flashes and vivid flames, and the roar of terror which burst from the distant population was fearfully distinct.

“ Oh, my God ! ” cried Philip, throwing off all disguise and acknowledging his faith in that dread hour ; “ God of my Christian brethren, Whom I have denied, it is terrible to be at war with Thee. Rome burns in punishment of my crime. If Thy vengeance must needs light up the funeral pyre of Gordianus, let it be elsewhere, but save—oh, save Rome ! ” He raised his son in his arms, and dashed madly headlong away.

History tells how, on that night, the theatre of Pompey, the pride of Rome, raised long years ago for the people’s amusement, destroyed by time and rebuilt for this occasion, had displayed a luxury and magnificence of decoration wonderful even in luxurious Rome ; how minium and gold dust had been scattered

in its arena, so that it shone to the eye like a brilliant sea ; how the bases and capitals of its columns had been gilt ; its hangings were of golden tissue, even as the dresses of its actors, so that nothing entered its precincts that day but what was tinged with gold. History, too, which records the lights and shadows in the life of a nation, tells how the beautiful *velarium*, of purple silk covered with gold stars, caught fire owing to the proximity of too many burning torches, as the plays were prolonged far on in the night, and, ere the people could flee, they were enveloped in that cloud of fire which extended everywhere, terrible, indiscriminating, yet all searching and retributive, as the Judgment of God. The flames raged long, consuming everything within their reach, everything that had contributed to the vanity of the show ; they beat against the stone walls, licking them as a ravenous animal anoints its prey before devouring it ; they leaped to the sides of the edifice, spreading over it like the waves of a mighty sea ; but they could not overthrow the charred walls which remain to this day—a ruin it is true, but still standing ; they are a record of those many paged annals of Rome's glory, whose story is told in stone ; they remain, a memory alike of Pompey, and of that first thousand years' anniversary !

CHAPTER XXVI.

“PUBLIUS! we were very stupid to dispense with the services of the female slaves; the Domina would not have taken them with her had we represented we required their aid; here are large rents which they ought to have repaired. What a good laugh they will have at us to-morrow, when they find this range of *togæ* we could not settle without them! How provoking, when we meant to have all ready against the Domina’s return. It looks so negligent to leave our work half done!”

“After all, Heraclius, we cannot chalk these *togæ* and *stolæ* until they are mended. We can easily explain that, since our masters do not disdain to listen to us, when we have good reasons to bring forward; our work is never heaped upon us, but measured out with all justice. Happy we! that serve such masters!”

“Well! that is just what makes me angry, not to have finished our work, when they are so considerate,” retorted the first speaker.

This conversation was going on between two slaves, in the *atrium* of a Roman house on the Mount Aventine, to which the reader has often accompanied us. It had been the dwelling place of poor Florentius, and his family continued to reside there. The model slaves we

have just brought into notice had remained that evening sole guardians of the place, together with the porter. In those days, the preparing of the garments of a Roman household was a work requiring much time and care : the absence of linen implied frequent washing of the woollen *togæ* and tunics. This occupation formerly fell to the lot of the daughters of the house ; the custom, however, had passed away, with the primitive simplicity of Rome's republican days, and even the most exemplary housewives, like Flora, were satisfied with presiding over the slaves when at work in the lavatory. Huge ponds of fresh water were allotted to this purpose in the country ; and every house in town was provided with similar appurtenances on a smaller scale, as may be noticed in Rome to this day. The woollen *stola*, *læna*, *laticlavium*, were washed, rinsed, bleached, by the female slaves (white, it must be remembered, was the patrician colour) ; the men then pressed them under huge rollers, and finally subjected them to the process of chalking, which completed the cleansing, by conferring on them a dazzling whiteness. Such had been the day's employment in Siona's household, not yet terminated, as we see, but left to the care of the male slaves, while their mistress, with her son and daughter, had received notice of an extraordinary meeting at the Catacombs that night, to pray for some brethren in danger ; and thither she had resorted, with her attendants, for all were Christians.

Publius and Heraclius worked on with all due diligence till the sun set and the twilight waned, till dark-

ness approached with such rapid strides that they could hardly distinguish one article of apparel from another. The same veil which covered the face of nature seemed to cast a grey, unsatisfactory hue on the handiwork they had toiled over so arduously ; they therefore removed the rolling apparatus to the inner hall, where they piled the chalked clothes in order ; then they returned to the *atrium*, with a view to keep guard with the porter, and breathe the cool evening air. Corn-fields spread a great way down the sloping hill, for the grounds were extensive and well cultivated ; each field was surrounded, not by a hedge, but by a row of small trees, and their branches, symmetrically cut to support the young vine, presented, each and all, the exact shape of a chalice, entwined with and entirely covered by the clinging tendrils and fostering leaves under whose shade the yet infant fruit was growing ; the corn, not yet matured by the summer sun, bowed gracefully to the evening breeze, giving life and motion to the landscape.

But as the outlines of nature became less visible, there arose out of her very darkness sparks of phosphoric fire, which grew, multiplied, spread on all sides, flying into the trees, on the blades of grass, among the sheaves of corn ; now softly eclipsed, like a tiny, twinkling earth-star, now congregating in numbers till there seemed to grow around them a transparent radiance ; then dispersing again, they diffused in the air an indescribable, unearthly beauty, pursuing their harmless course, those fireflies of the night ! Sweet little messengers, peculiar to the land where so much of

genius found its birthplace and its tomb, where the shades of its departed great ones seem to hover about it still, a cloud of glory by day and a pillar of fire by night, faint image of the Majesty of Jehovah resting on His people, for genius is but an emanation of the Most High !

The fireflies of Italy ! They linger in the mind of the traveller who has lived awhile in their radiance, even as the *nimbus* of mysterious light that painters love to place on the brow of the Madonna ; and, just as the inner world is a reflection of the exterior, there is in light, and its gradations towards darkness, a mysterious language to be understood but by those who have studied nature and learned her secrets in solitude ; it is now seemingly endowed with the faculty of creating, now replete with the strengthening influence of repose. It has its day and its night : the one has the bright joyfulness of youth, the other the calm melancholy of age ; that brings with it the buoyancy of hope, this the soothing pleasures of memory, so truly that those who mourn love to weep in the night-time. Oh, mother earth ! what wailings hast thou not heard and counted in the night-time, from the highest in creation to the lowest, from the Egyptian mothers calling on their first born, to the plaintive bird of our woods bewailing his lost mate. Little fireflies of Italy ! be you the offspring of a soil too rich in vegetation, or come you from the skies, we cherish you equally, for to us you seem to be the night-lamps, lit by a mighty love over the great dead of your favoured land ; nor could a profane hand

touch or harm you, you that pass along purifying the air, like a lambent light impregnated with the memories of the past.

Presently, as the slaves were looking out on the fields, they saw by the waving of the corn and the movement of the fireflies, swayed to and fro, as by a sudden current, that some one was coming up the hill. They heard voices speaking in a strange tongue; this was such a novelty as to alarm them. They fastened the door of the house and ranged themselves outside with lighted torches, ready to resist any intrusion. They soon found, however, that the intentions of the new-comers were peaceable. The first was a man attired in the Roman costume, strangely blended with the garb of a foreign clime; he was followed by a female carrying an infant, well wrapped up, to shelter it from the night air. Both approached with a confidence singular in strangers, and rather offensive to the slaves, who challenged them.

"*Ave domus Florentii,*" was the mild answer of the visitor.

"You know this house?" they enquired in more subdued tones.

"It is as dear to me as the roof of my fathers; but you are young, and know me not. Where is the old porter? Surely Claudius cannot have become so soon a stranger to his fellow-slaves!"

"Claudius!" they echoed; "is it indeed Claudius? We know you not, it is true, by sight, but have heard you so often spoken of as the former *villicus* of this

household, that we bid you welcome in the name of our mistress."

"But," resumed Claudius, hesitating, "my beloved master?"

"Has been dead a year!"

The man fell back a few paces, like one who has run hard to reach a goal, and is arrested by a sudden shock; his surprise, grief, and disappointment were painful to witness. "Tell me," he enquired, making an effort to master his emotion, "how is the Domina, and how is Flora?"

"Both in good health, as also the young Dominus."

"All unchanged?"

"All! save that increasing years have brought to each of them, respectively, an increase of wisdom, beauty, and virtue."

"Then my journey will be well repaid, though nothing can make up for the loss of my master. Friends, I perceive there is no one at home but you three: I think I can guess, without enquiring from you, where they are all gone to. I shall go seek the Domina at the Catacombs; meanwhile, I beg for a night's shelter for my grandchild and her nurse."

"But yourself, Claudius you must be weary. Have you travelled from a great distance?"

"From my British home; but I am not weary since I see this loved threshold once more. I do not wish to cross it an unexpected guest, but, I think, I may forestall my mistress's permission for this little child, who may suffer from the night air."

They opened the doors which led to the inner chambers and beckoned to the foreign nurse to enter. She took off the covering by which she had concealed her young charge from view ; the little creature uttered a cry of delight, and looked around her with baby wonder ; she raised her tiny arms, displaying in her face that dazzling whiteness peculiar to the Northern race. Claudius looked at her lovingly, stroking her hands, which were so small that they were covered by one of his strong fingers.

“ The child is hurt ! ” exclaimed Heraclius, who was bending over the feeble infant with the attraction that inclines strength towards weakness ; “ see, it has a scratch on its little hand, it is red with blood ! ”

“ Oh, no ! ” replied Claudius, “ that mark is a glorious stain, a sacred inheritance.” He kissed the babe reverently, then added : “ My friends, I leave to your care my little Helena and her nurse ; I shall return later with our masters ”.

He disappeared, passing through the corn-fields with his own familiar tread and practised step.

* * * * *

That evening witnessed an extraordinary meeting of the brethren at the Catacombs ; they had come in great numbers, as was ever their wont when threatened with persecution ; they met in the communion of saints to pray for those who were called to fight the good combat, and often triumph and consolation was the answer to their prayer, even as the petition of Moses had proved more powerful than the swords of his people. This

night, however, it was not the fear of persecution that had gathered them together, but imminent danger was in store for one newly baptised. Volumnia, as we already described, returned to Vesta's altar to find the fire extinguished and her own doom written in the yet warm ashes. The unbolted door, the girl's refusal to account for her absence, or to submit to any ordeal that might clear her from suspicion, all seemed to bespeak a guilt, greater even than the culpable negligence of having allowed the sacred fire to die out. As this was the second time a grave accusation was laid to her account the case was more serious, and public opinion was against her. Awaiting the day of her legal trial she was consigned to a cell, within the precincts of the temple, and treated as a prisoner. Volumnia suffered both from the isolation and from an apprehension of her coming doom, but still more from the keen sense of her injured reputation; she had sacrificed so much, resisted every temptation, thrown away all hope of earthly happiness to preserve her name without a stain. What then! was the treasure of her virgin fame to be torn from her now? Ah, why had she not sooner turned to serve a Master Who never suffers those who trust in Him to perish? But she was His now, His for life everlasting at least, even if the days of her present life were numbered! And this was most probable;—what or who could save her?—her father could alone declare that it was under his protection she had spent the night out of her enclosure, but he could not do so without compromising the whole Christian community.

No ! die she must ; and with the same heroic determination which she had brought to the fulfilment of her past stern duties, she now prepared herself for death, accepting it as the expiation of her pagan life, as the end of a career which had known more sorrow than joy. One moment she hesitated whether she might not reveal the motive of her leaving the temple on that fatal night, at least privately, to the Grand Vestal, so as to clear herself from the unjust suspicions cast upon her honour. While deliberating on this point, she knelt down to pray to her newly-found God, Whose Presence she felt by the suggestions of her own heart, though her intellect could hardly account for it. While thus engaged, her eye rested on a fissure in the wall, so slight as to be hardly perceptible except in one place, where the Roman cement, so seldom untrue, had mouldered away, leaving a chink barely large enough for a Roman farthing to pass through. She thought she perceived an insect crawling, and stretched out her hand to welcome the sharer of her captivity, but it fell down and remained motionless. How strange ! she thought. She picked it up ; it was a small piece of written vellum. She crept to the little window which admitted a stolen ray of light into her cell, and saw it bore characters almost imperceptible, so finely were they traced. She deciphered them, however ; they formed broken words, such as the Romans used in inscriptions. “ Help is nigh.—Silence.—Hope.” Was this addressed to her ? Might it not be a chance writing that had lain there a long time ? But that crevice

proved the contrary. Hope ! what a sweet word ! Who had addressed it to her ? She had so many that loved her—father, sister, Christian brethren—was it any of these ? She thought and wondered until there stole over her one of those silent convictions which are either retrospective or prophetic, but always unerring ; for they come as the whisper of one soul to another, heard beyond the precincts of its mortal envelope ! She understood it all now ! That message was to her the breathing of a first love which had never died, which had remained faithful when gods and men were unkind ; it was watching over her now, and would save her from destruction ! Could she accept it ? Could she return it ? Yes ! for her Vestal's career was over, and, as her companions had given her up, she was no longer bound to them. Even as a fire utterly extinguished may be lit up by a ray from heaven, so was it with the rekindling of this pure and mighty love. She felt now that Icilius would be an instrument in God's hands to save her, but how ? She knew not ; she crouched down and prayed.

* * * * *

When Claudius reached the Catacombs, the instructions and prayers were over, and the faithful were preparing, by a humble confession of their sins, to assist at the dread Sacrifice and be made participators in the Eucharistic mysteries. Priests occupied those stone seats, which remain to the present day, fixed in the wall of the private chapels, in which the male and female parts of the congregation were distinctly separate.

The minister of God sat there as judge, and at his feet knelt a penitent: this attitude gave rise to the gross pagan calumny, which described the act of humility as one of adoration. Since the establishment of auricular confession, however, penitents no longer kneel in front of the confessor, but one on each side of him. In the chapel set apart for women were two seats facing one another. Opposite the ministering priest sat a witness, too far to hear what was said, but jealously guarding by the very fact of his presence both the sanctity of the sacerdotal character and the reputation of the matron or virgin who knelt there as to God's representative. Thus the witness could at any time be called upon to attest that nothing but holy rites were practised in the Christian assemblies.

Claudius remained for some time in the background; the well remembered scene called up a long train of thought. Here he had taken up the sweet yoke of the Lord, which had rendered the burden of captivity so precious to him; here he had knelt, a slave, side by side with his Christian masters; here he had learned the lessons which he afterwards taught his brethren. He recognised almost every one that passed before him at intervals in that dim, shadowy light; for a bright sconce fixed in the wall sufficiently relieved the darkness of the subterranean passages. He was very anxious to see his good mistress, and the dear child he had held at the baptismal font, but he remembered they must be in the women's chapel. He knelt down, and, overcome by the conflict of various emotions, his strong frame quivered

as if he had been chilled by a cold wind. One of the brethren kneeling near him enquired in kind tones whether he were ill or in want of anything. "I thank you, brother," he answered; "I am in good health, but I have been absent for some time, and everything is new to me; I am still clad, as you see, in a traveller's garb."

"That is too light a covering for you; take this," and he handed Claudius a woollen *læna*, which the latter gratefully accepted. Looking more attentively at the courteous speaker, he observed that he wore the dress of a *fossor*, or grave-digger: a pick-axe was slung in his girdle, and he held, suspended from a chain, one of those small terra-cotta lamps which are so well known now-a-days to the lovers of Roman antiquities.

"I may have seen you before," observed Claudius, "but I do not recognise you. How come you, so young, to be a *fossor*?"

This remark alluded to the custom of choosing the oldest and most experienced of Christian workmen to act as *fossores*, whereas this was a stripling whose delicate hands, unaccustomed to toil, seemed to testify to his unfitness for that kind of labour; yet energy of purpose was depicted in his countenance and every movement, since he had not laid aside his pick-axe, even in that hour of prayer. He looked for a moment slightly troubled by Claudius's question, but, after this short hesitation, answered frankly: "You must be a stranger, indeed, if you know neither my history nor my purpose, but you shall hear all in good time. I perceive

you are waiting your turn to approach the tribunal of penance ; my time is but short, and I have a great work before me ; will you allow me to take your place ? ”

Claudius withdrew immediately, and the youth entered. On issuing he seemed to be absorbed in prayer, and passed at once to the chapel of the Mysteries. The Briton prepared likewise for confession, for he had travelled from a great distance, and during his journey had not been able to approach the sacraments. By and by he too sought the altar where Mass was being offered, and found himself side by side with the young *fossor* : together they prayed and partook of the Holy Eucharist, and, when they had concluded their thanksgiving, Claudius looked round for those he had especially come to meet ; and, not seeing them, he followed his new acquaintance, who was leaving the crypt, and accosted him : “ I have already told you I am a traveller : I am anxious to see Laurentius, son to Florentius, who died a year ago. Can you point out the youth to me ? ”

“ It was he who served the Mass at which we have been assisting ; Laurentius holds the office of deacon.”

“ What ! my dear little master is now a deacon ! Oh, my God, I thank thee ; this hour repays me for years of toil.”

“ But who, then, are you that seem to be a stranger, and yet speak as a brother ? ”

“ My name is Claudius ; I was in former years slave to Florentius.”

“ Ah, I know you by name, having heard of you often. Perhaps you may remember me too : I am Icilius.”

“Noble youth! forgive me that I addressed you in so familiar a manner. You have much altered, and your garb”

“Tells of a mighty work to be accomplished. Farewell, Claudius; I must to my task. Remain here; I shall announce to Laurentius the news of your arrival, and bid him come to you.”

He shouldered his pick-axe, and withdrew. Claudius waited, standing in the same place till the congregation had dispersed, then he heard no sound save the *fossor* continuing his work among the graves. Just as he was beginning to fear he had been forgotten, the loose sand crumbled under a light, elastic step, and Claudius felt himself pressed in a vigorous embrace.

“My old friend! my dear father’s favourite slave! my good Claudius!”

This greeting was uttered in a tremulous voice, with irregular, jarring accents, which sounded sweet music to the old man’s heart. Laurentius, who was just acquiring the deep tones of early manhood, unwittingly fell back into the treble of childish days, when emotion spoke within him.

“My beloved master, my dear boy! let me gaze on you! you are taller than your poor old servant.”

“But, Claudius, this looks like a dream: is it you indeed?”

“Where is my dear lady, your mother? where your sister? I have been to your house already, and I know the bereavement that has fallen on it.”

“I am glad you know it; for that trial is one we can

neither speak of nor fathom as yet. My mother and sister will be here immediately. A certain number of us agreed to remain after the celebration of the Mysteries, for there is a great work to be done to-night in secret. That is the reason I delayed so long before coming to you, in order that I might previously prepare all that was requisite so as to converse with you without interruption."

He rose as he spoke, for Siona and Flora came up in great haste to welcome the freed slave. Laurentius felt a thrill of joy as he perceived that his mother's countenance wore a smile. This was the first time she looked her wonted self since the night she had wept by her husband's corpse.

Then followed a sweet hushed chorus of exclamations of delighted surprise ; questions were answered by questions ; the torrent of words was subdued by the vicinity of the dead, and limited to the simple statement of events that had occurred on both sides. Claudius had the most to tell, and they pressed him to begin his narrative, but he often dropped the thread. He had returned to his mountain fastnesses in time to see his wife at the point of death. She was a noble woman, and had kept her faith to him to the end, although she had believed him dead a long time. She had reared her son to be the successor and avenger of his father, the heir to the great virtues of the house of Caradoc : alone she had sufficed to the task, rejecting the offers of more than one suitor. The son of Claudius had grown up so valorous and daring, as to recover, by the power

of his arm, the small principedom which had belonged to his fathers ; for there is ever an innate strength which courts victory in the fixed purpose of one who has a destiny to fulfil. The young Coël was as prudent as he was courageous, and governed so well the province he had wrested from the Romans, that these usurpers of his native land, weary with disputing his title, ended by recognising it, and respected his rights. Such was the tale which the dying woman could proudly tell her husband, asking him whether she had not faithfully accomplished the work he had left her to do ; and he, clasping her cold hands, and entreating her to live still, had wept over her virtues, as well as gloried in her conjugal love. Could she not be spared ? No ! the word had gone forth from on high.

But Claudia's pure, noble, faithful adherence to duty had its reward even on earth ; for, before she expired, while her husband, watching her closed eyelids, wondered whether she had already fallen into that sleep that knows no waking, a whisper from her lips brought to her side the son who had been all in all to her, and whom she loved to call the child of her widowhood :

“Thou hast been from childhood obedient to my every wish,” she said, fixing on him a long, earnest gaze, which changed no more ; “hearken to my last advice : choose to thyself as a bride Helena of the noble house of Caradoc ; from her and from no other will thy race derive honour and blessings. It has been revealed to me that, in the fruit of your union, God will reward the fidelity I have kept to my absent lord.”

Those were her last words on earth ; they were sacred to the father and the son, as a promise from on high, blended with the sanctity of a message from the grave. Coël sought out this orphan girl, a scion of the same princely race as himself, and brought her home to his hearth ; she took the place of the mother he had so much loved, but, alas ! not for long. After two years of a most happy union, he found himself a widower. Helena had expired, giving birth to a little girl who took her name. The young man, in the bitterness of his anguish, recalled his mother's last words. Was this then the fulfilment of her promise ? what had come of this union which was to confer glory on his house ? what was a puny baby-girl to him ? He took his battle-axe down from a rusty nail, and armed himself to go forth again to war, but his absence was as short-lived as his anger ; he returned to the government of his people, and, in fulfilling his duties towards them, forgot his private sorrows. He surrounded with walls the chief town of his small principality, and Colchester bears to this day in its arms and its name traces of the good king Coël whom the Romans recognised as Coilus.*

Meanwhile, Claudius had grown attached to his infant grandchild with the clinging fondness of a nature, which, torn too early from home affections, had remained isolated in the impossibility of entwining itself with another existence. That child seemed to him less his son's daughter than a legacy from his own dead

* The arms of Colchester are a rugged cross surrounded with four crowns.

wife; thus the little one became sacred to him as a relic of the past: he would listen to its wailings, as if they were the expression of its infant intelligence, fondle it, play with it, watch its features as they changed. It learned to love him; it would throw up its little arms as he approached, and he would stoop to feel the contact of its baby lips. Once the nurse showed him signs like scars on the tiny hands of her little charge, asserting she had vainly endeavoured to wash them away. The old man started, looked down on his own hands, where the same signs were visible: he alone knew their meaning and caressed the child thoughtfully.

“Had she any such marks elsewhere,” he asked, “besides her hands?”

The woman loosened the little vest the child wore, and showed him on the baby breast a cross distinctly traced in red, as if a finger dipped in blood had thus marked her mysteriously. He gazed at it reverently, and from that day forward he looked on his grandchild in a new light: she was the last descendant of that family that counted among its glories Praxedes and Pudentiana, and had inherited, even as Claudius himself, those stains which clung to their hands after they had passed their lives in collecting, with sponges and linen cloths, the blood of the first martyrs. Such was the reward of those virgins, and of their brothers who married later and passed on to their children the precious inheritance.

Claudius pondered long over the child: was she destined to be a martyr? he wondered, as the red cross on her breast seemed to foretell; but no! his race was

to be blessed in this little one ; such was his wife's prophecy. How then was it to be fulfilled ?

And then—such is the waywardness of man's heart !—much as he had pined for freedom and for Britain, he remembered Rome with gratitude, sympathy, nay, almost with love. He thought of his good master, Florentius, and longed to see him again ; his young mistress, Flora, remembered him, no doubt !—would that Helena could grow up like her—that she could learn from Flora all those refinements of education of which she must remain ignorant in her British home. At first this seemed an idle wish, but by degrees it fastened upon him until it began to assume the appearance of a duty. What was to become of Helena when he himself would be no more ? Could he but make her known to Flora, that would establish between them a link which would conduce to the moral advantage of his child : he laid the project before his son, and, by degrees won him over to his desires.

“ Now my dear mistress,” exclaimed Claudius, as he wound up his long narrative, “ I have brought my heart's treasure with me. I took her up to your house, and left her under your roof while I came here, for I thought you would permit me to do so.”

“ You are quite welcome, Claudius. The home which you made happy by your virtuous example, in former days, is by rights the home of your child. We shall speak of her at leisure ; we have another important work to do this very night, and He Who directed your steps hither, has doubtless sent you to our aid : you

who are physically strong, and calm in all you undertake, you are the very person most fitted to help Icilius."

"In what way?" asked Claudius: "I met the youth you mention a while ago. We had some conversation together, and he too alluded to a mysterious work for which he was preparing: he wore the garb of a *fossor*."

"And I," broke in Laurentius gaily, "am going to assume a similar disguise: time presses. . . . I must off to my task. I refer you to Flora for explanations; meanwhile, I engage your services, Claudius."

The slave rose, with the deference of former days, as his young master moved away, and watched him with a feeling of admiration not unmingled with a shade of pride. Was that indeed the child he had brought up, now grown to man's estate, of noble aspect, handsome features, gentle manners, yet with a lofty bearing. His eyes still retained that expression which was peculiar to the family to which he belonged, save that it had changed from the vague dreaminess of youth to the calm expectation with which a martyr looks forward to a death that is near at hand and a life that is beyond.

Thence he turned to Flora: she too had altered, and each period of life seemed to have conferred upon her a characteristic charm. In her were blended the innocence of childhood, the grace of womanhood, the peacefulness of piety: often abstracted apparently, yet attentive to the smallest wishes of those she loved, her soul was ever fixed on One Who was invisibly present to her, and she seemed to look out on the whole world

with dovelike eyes, in which innocence was unmingled with fear.

"Claudius," exclaimed Siona, "did you understand me when I spoke to you just now? You seem to be lost in thought."

Flora was fain to bless the slave's remissness which had aroused her mother's dormant energies. Siona had, since her husband's death, fallen into a state of fixed melancholy, which the call of duty alone could dissipate; but the presence of the old trusty slave brought back to her mind the remembrance of former days, of one evening in particular, when, in her garden at Aricia, she had hearkened to his teaching, and read the gospel by his side; and later on, when the Flora who was now the sole joy of her life, lay a helpless infant in the lap of death, Claudius had saved her by the energy of his prayer and the might of his devotion. Had not that man proved a blessing to her household? Yes! Surely his destiny must be interwoven with theirs; and a transient gleam of the peaceful brightness of her married life stole over Siona, as, with an authoritative gesture, she spoke to Claudius in an assumed tone of command.

"You must go with these young men," she said; "your trusty arm will aid them, and your maturer age restrain their impetuosity."

"Dear lady, since you honour me with your confidence, explain to me how I am to serve you or yours."

"You remember Volumnia?"

"I remember her as a friend of my young mistress and a Vestal virgin."

"She is now a Christian, and this very night she is to be borne out to the Via Salaria to be buried alive."

"As a martyr? Oh what glory for one so young!"

"No! she is not even suspected of having renounced the false gods of Rome, but she has been most unjustly accused of breaking her Vestal's vow: we are all convinced of her innocence, and each of us would do anything to save her: we have laid our plans. It is for this that we have assembled to-night to pray that God may bless the undertaking, and the Holy Spirit enlighten those who are devoting themselves to save the innocent victim."

Claudius looked for an explanation.

"The project has been kept very secret," she resumed. "Icilius has taken the garb of a *fossor*, and worked unceasingly among the tombs of our brethren; not only that the charity he thus expended upon others, in imitation of the faithful Tobias, might be returned in mercy to poor Volumnia, but also that, in practising this gloomy work, he might learn to save her."

"To save her!" exclaimed Claudius—"to draw her out of her living grave! What a noble attempt, though next to impossible! But such heroic devotion deserves its reward. Oh, how great is the power of our Christian faith, which has thus cast the light of divine grace on the blindness of an earthly passion, inspiring Icilius with the intuition of a holy love! I go, my beloved mistress, proud to share the dangers, and, let us hope, the success of the enterprise. But we must have three men of muscular strength to assist us, for we shall have

to move the large paving-stones ; some of us must hold the ladder, others be on the watch, for fear we be surprised ; and, finally, we shall have to bear away our precious charge, for whom we must provide a *lettiga*."

"You will find our household slaves waiting for us without ; they are all trustworthy, and well known to you. I leave it to you to choose such as you deem most fit. Claudius, I am full of hope, now that you have undertaken the work. May the guardian angels of Rome watch over you !"

"Amen, my beloved mistress. May God help me to return some part of the debt of gratitude I contracted in former days. And when all is happily accomplished, where shall we bear the noble Volumnia ?"

"It would be dangerous to re-enter the walls of Rome, therefore let us meet at the cave of Hippolytus : horses have been sent there this morning, to be ready for flight. Claudius, once more I charge you to make use of every precaution, in order to ward off danger from the brave but impetuous youths."

"Lady, Our God Who directed my steps to your hearth in this hour, has not done so in vain."

And they parted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOWER and lower fell the veil of night over the mighty city, and many watched its gradual increase, for, even as the mother in the desert veiled her brow while she bade her child lie down to die, so Rome could not look on the death-pangs of those she had borne. Many gazed on the twilight of that night, with beating hearts, now dreading its approach, now chiding it for its tardiness, feeling that suspense is the worst of tortures. The parents of Volumnia had covered their heads with the dust of their household hearth, now desolate and doomed; they could not bear to look at the light of day, vainly desiring that the coming of this dread night and its sad work might be to them as a thing unknown. But the poor girl herself, who had so lately passed into the realms of the invisible world, seemed to be possessed of a strange, intuitive power which forbade her to despond. Lucilla looked out defyingly on the city, watched the sun go down, stared unflinchingly at its burning rays, remained motionless, as if watching over her parents, who were weeping silently in the darkest corner of the house: she did not try to console them, did not shed a tear, but her every feature, even to a strange smile that curled her lip, all betrayed a suppressed emotion which mastered every other

feeling. By and by she stole out without any one heeding her, or asking where she sped.

And Volumnia! did she too watch the twilight, awaiting the coming hour which was to be her last? Yes! from a cleft in her prison wall, a ray of light stole in on her obliquely, like a farewell from Vesta to her hapless votary. All was over now; she had hoped for succour in vain. Her faithful friends had no doubt endeavoured to come to her aid, but they must have failed in the attempt. She had ceased to think of the message received from them, and prayed now only for resignation and calm fortitude. Her prayer was heard, for it was not in vain that her life had been passed in self-sacrifice and stern obedience to duty; the moral courage inherent to her nature had thus attained great development, and she could nerve herself to meet her fate.

When the lictor came at the appointed hour to summon Volumnia, she rose from her knees, and left her cell; and, save that her eyes were sunk, and her cheek already blanched with the marble whiteness of the tomb, her step had the same firmness as when she had trodden day after day the pavement of the *ara*. What mattered it to her that she was leaving a prison for a grave? It would prove to her but a passage to that Eternal Home she believed in now; and she knew that many of her brethren in the faith had passed through torture to attain the same goal. As she stood on the threshold, surrounded by the lictors, in presence of the high priest and his officials, she motioned them

aside for one moment. All obeyed the commanding gesture of that soft white arm, for the young priestess, in this her last hour of freedom, had assumed something of the majesty of death. It was but for a moment; her bosom heaved while she took one long breath of that air she was never to breathe again—the air of Rome! It had kissed her brow in infancy, soothed her in sorrow; it passed over her now in the sigh of the evening breeze; it was the farewell of her native land! And then repelling indignantly the proffered hand of the lictor, who would have guided her steps:

“You have no right to touch a spotless Vestal,” she said; “remember rather that it was my privilege to rob you of your prey every time you crossed my path leading a condemned criminal.”

So saying, she ascended unaided the covered *lettiga*, whose sides and roof were stuffed with wool, and admitted of no opening, lest the cries of the hapless victim should be heard, and move by their piteousness the inflexible justice of him who walked by her side in the living funeral as priest and judge. But such a precaution was not needed for Volumnia; she would not utter a cry. Her pale lips were compressed and her hands clasped as she stood up one moment in her *lettiga* before they covered it; cast one look of mute appeal to the blue sky above her—one farewell glance all around, then knelt down, making the sign of the cross. The lid was closed and she was no longer seen. The melancholy procession passed through the streets of Rome, but it did not attract the gaze of the passers-by; on the

contrary, all fled at its approach; women hid their faces and covered the heads of their children lest they should see. All the way down the Forum the shops were closed, either as a mark of public sympathy and respect towards the tribune Nemesion, or that Rome would not look on the dishonour of her priestess. The fate of Volumnia had been the talk of many for days, both in the Forum and in private dwellings: all who knew the noble girl's proud nature believed her innocent: suspicion could not fall on one like her, who had never been known to stoop to the petty weaknesses of her sex. But yet! why would she not explain her mysterious disappearance of that night? She had proclaimed her innocence, and disdained to prove it by anything but her word: appearances were against her. The sacred fire had been found extinguished, the door partially open: where had she gone to? No accomplice had been discovered in the neighbourhood; Icilius, immediately suspected, because known to have been her affianced lover, was vainly sought for: no one had seen him about the town for several days. Perhaps he had fled in the fear of being implicated. Unhappy young pair! apparently guilty, at least, so it was supposed; but no one understood what was the exact ground of accusation.

The funeral cortége proceeded up the hill of Quirinus; they passed before the temple of the Sun, for that religion, so long abhorred, was now admitted into Rome; on towards the Porta Nomentana, they reached that point where the road comes in junction with another from the Porta Salaria; here was the Campus Sceleratus,

which might have been called more appropriately the field of sorrow, rather than of crime ; for, too often, alas ! did vice stalk the streets of Rome in all the panoply of proud rectitude, while a hapless maiden expiated by a fearful doom faults that ought to have been visited on the heads of others rather than her own.

It was dusk when they reached the fatal spot, yet light enough for the sad work they had to do ; the lictors lit their torches, which emitted a lurid flame, contrasting with the last glimmer of the waning day ; the high priest approached the *lettiga*, and proceeded to cut the thongs of leather which fastened it. Volumnia again appeared to sight, no longer pale, for the exhaustion produced by want of air had made the blood rush to her head ; her eyes were swollen and she looked haggard ; she was hardly able to move, and when lifted out of the conveyance she remained sitting on the edge, and made a sign she was ready.

The high priest uttered the adjuration by which he delivered her over to the infernal gods ; she silently cast her care on Him Who knew her innocence, and she looked calmly on. Her executioners were now standing one on either side of an open vault ; they lowered a ladder, whose steps she knew she must descend to enter her tomb, otherwise they were ready to hurl her in if she went not of her own accord. She looked up to Heaven's vault above, where a few stars were breaking in on the twilight and looking down on her, twinkling dimly as if they wept,—would they shine on her as she went down, she wondered. Oh, if she could but die

thus, in the open air, she thought, with that sky to gaze on until the end, death would lose its terrors. The priest was muttering strange imprecations on her devoted head, the torches burned on, but she neither heard nor saw anything now—her mind was taking a rapid survey of bygone days, of early childhood spent in her parents' home . . . Poor parents! what must they be suffering for her sake to-night! . . .

The lictor approached to lead her to the vault. She had partially regained her strength and stood up. . . . She turned round to give one last look at the face of nature, ere she bid it farewell. . . . Ah, what was it she saw? was it a vision, the fruit of her disordered brain that rose before her at this hour when she would fain forget? Down there where the line of earth blended with the sky there, behind those indistinct trees, what was that figure she could hardly define, yet which seemed so strangely visible? It wore a dark *toga*; it lay crouched in the long grass, as if seeking concealment. Her eyes grew fixed; they assumed that look which appears on the countenances of the dead. She felt herself led down the steps, and followed mechanically, unresistingly. When did they leave her? When was the vault walled up? She knew not!

* * * * *

There was a lamp burning by her side, such as had been the companion of her vigils by the sacred fire in the temple. The place did not look new or strange; at least, in her bewilderment she could hardly take

in the aspect of her new abode. A small low bed was prepared for her, and, as she felt very weak, she was glad to lie down. She closed her eyes for a little while. It was only when rest and solitude had somewhat restored her self-consciousness that she awoke to the horror of her situation. The lamp was burning. True ! but when its measure of oil would be consumed, what then ? Must it go out and leave her in darkness ? Oh, God, how terrible ! The vault was cold and damp. . . . Were there venomous animals about ? she wondered. No, she was alone ! Alone ! with so many who loved her above ground, so many who would have given their lives to save her or die with her. Alone ! Why, even the Man-God she so lately learned to adore died with His Mother by His side. . . . When would the moment of death come ? Would it take long ? Would she feel its approach ? Would she fall asleep before it came ? What could the feeling be ? Her pulse throbbed, her heart beat quickly, the blood rushed wildly through her frame with the irregular motion of fever. . . . Now she felt burning. The place seemed on fire. Had she called it cold a while ago ? She must have been mad to think so. Oh, this heat ! How insufferable ! how parching ! She longed for a drink to assuage her thirst ! She sat up on her couch, and found they had left by her side a loaf of bread, a little oil, a pitcher of water, lest Vesta's priestess should die of hunger, which would have been deemed a sacrilege by those who did not fear to be cruel.

She put her lips to the *amphora*, and drank a deep

draught, then fell back again. Oh, that she could sleep ! But no ! the hot tide of blood beat against her temples till they ached with violent pain ; she felt burning, within and without. Soon her excited phantasy conjured up strange thoughts. Perhaps fire would surprise her there ; . . . perhaps Vesta would vent her anger against her faithless priestess by consuming her alive. She grew afraid of the little lamp that glared at her like a menace of death. Should she put it out ? But then darkness would ensue, and that would be still more terrible. She must lie there, while the chain of death drew round her, nearer and nearer, until it should clasp her in an iron embrace. Could she live until she had breathed all the air contained in that vault ? and when once it was exhausted, what would follow ? Her mind, under the impression of horror and loneliness, continued to work in this way, increasing her sufferings. At one time she thought she could perceive a rarefaction in the atmosphere. She felt a difficulty in breathing. Oh, God ! was it coming then ? Terror paralysed her so, that she endeavoured in vain to loosen her girdle. She sank exhausted into a kind of half slumber, from which she awoke with a sense of suffocation. She shrieked in an agony of fear, and jumped up wildly from her couch ! . . . Hark ! how that shriek reverberated ! There must be much air yet around her to produce such lengthened echoes ! . . . But why did the sound remain fixed in one place ? Why did it cling to the vault of her prison ? Why did it reverberate in that stone which closed it ? How strange ! It

rang like the percussion of metal striking against flint. . . . She stood up and listened. . . . What was it ? Had not her tyrants left her long ago ? Had they not remained till the orifice of the vault was completely covered with earth, so that no memory of the hapless maiden should exist, and every trace of her passing away might be effaced ?

What then could this be ? had they returned to inspect their work ? did they not know it was but too safely done ? Was this a new form of adjuration by which they devoted her again to the infernal gods ? Alas ! why need they curse one whose life had been a long suffering doom ? She returned to her couch . . . she had rather have lain forgotten there if they had let her . . . but she knew all would soon be over now, and resolved to await the end patiently.

That strange ringing sound was repeated . . . something was displaced and removed from the ceiling above her . . . she heard voices, then felt a stream of cold, fresh, pure air rushing into the vault, and her name was uttered in a low whisper—*Volumnia!* She did not stir . . . she could hardly think or feel. One idea rose to her mind. . . . Was she dead already ? . . . were the spirits of the other world calling on her to come and join them ? . . . How strange ! if her passing into the vale of the shadow of death had been so soon accomplished, she thought, and wondered she had not experienced more pain in the transit. . . . Perhaps this might be owing to her being a Christian !

. . . better so! . . . and she relapsed into a state of half consciousness. . . .

Again she heard some one calling on her name . . . a bundle of ropes was thrown, which, being fastened at the top, began to uncoil slowly, forming a ladder, on which a shadowy figure was seen to descend slowly, bearing a lamp in its hand; having reached the ground safely, it drew near her and gazed at her with a look she had known long ago. She recognised the features of Icilius, and the cry she would have uttered expired on her lips. . . . Her eyes closed, and she swooned away. . . . She thought she had met his spirit, and that she herself was now in the land of shades. . . . She did not hear the hollow whisper which broke the silence of her sepulchre, and which would have revealed the truth to her.

* * * * *

Once more we must return to the ancient cave of the Appian Way, where a small number of Christians were assembled; flowers were laid on a rude altar, before which knelt Hippolytus, the hermit, and his pupil Laurentius. Reparata and other pious women were grouped together in a recess applying simple restoratives to a suffering sister; all the rest were praying, and among them one young man, with head bowed to the earth, poured forth his supplications with an energy which seemed to wrestle with God's mercy; and lo! he was heard! for soon one of the matrons left the group and came to his side. He started to his feet as she bent

towards him and said, loud enough to be heard by all :
“ Icilius, she has recovered ”.

She returned to her charge, and he followed her, and there, in the presence of that Christian assembly, at the foot of the altar of the God they both adored, the young man addressed his long-lost bride.

He told her how the idea of trying to save her had been suggested by the Emperor Philip himself, who, on the night of the *ludi sæculares*, had met her friends in such a favourable spot, that it was easy for them to address him and plead her cause. He had declared himself powerless to revoke her sentence, but seemed willing, nay anxious, to bring about her deliverance, and had illustrated a plan to that effect by a rough sketch :—all this had been as soon as possible communicated to Icilius,—so that he had time to mature in secret the plot in which his own happiness was involved. He had consulted his brethren, obtained the promise of their assistance, and sent her the message she had received in prison. He had accompanied her funeral, or rather preceded it, concealing himself under the leafy trees till the awful ceremony was over. Had it not been for Lucilla, however, he could not have succeeded, for, owing to the precautions used by the priests, in concealing from all eyes the opening of the vault, he might have himself lost all trace of it ; but the blind-born girl, whose acute hearing had caught the sound produced by the key-stone as it was being fastened in the vault, was able to direct their steps towards the exact spot.

It was well, he observed, that no time had been

lost, for the cement was yet fresh when they arrived, and the earth was easily dug up : he had, for some time previously, made himself expert as a *fossor*, which much facilitated his self-imposed task ; but, he added, he was more than indebted to Claudius who was at hand to raise the stone with him. He had thought all was over when he found her as one dead lying on her funeral couch ; but on his reascending into exterior life, as it were, with that mournful burthen in his arms, Flora had reassured him, saying this was not death, but a temporary sleep. Then he had closed the vault again, covering it as before ; faithful slaves had borne her swiftly and safely to this place of refuge ; but she could not remain here long, and Rome would receive her no more. Preparations had been made for an immediate flight, which Providence seemed to favour ; for Reparata, the friend of Flora, being called to Etruria by the wishes of her uncle, had already made arrangements some days previously for her journey thither, and she now waited before embarking to hear of the success of the plot. . . . Icilius stopped short in his narrative. He knew that Volumnia could not travel without a protector, and he felt he had earned for himself the right of being her husband, but he was too generous to proffer his suit at a moment when gratitude must necessarily absorb every feeling on her part.

The Vestal, too, saw at a glance the difficulties of her position, and the blushes of maiden modesty covered her features, but lately shrouded with the pallor of the tomb. She did not even thank Icilius, for she felt too

deeply what she owed to him, but she looked round on the faces of the brethren that surrounded her, all of them faithful friends. "My father and my mother are not here," she observed, in a tone of inquiry.

"Claudius is gone for them," replied Siona, "but they will only confirm the advice I here give you in the name of all. Your path lies straight before you : the mysterious dispositions of Providence in your regard, your own safety, nay, the laws of decorum, all bid you accept the hand of your brave deliverer. This step, though sudden, is not a hasty one. You have long been affianced, sorrow has chastened your mutual affection, and it is time that it should be sanctified by the rites of our holy Church. Do not hesitate, dear children," she added, taking one hand of each in both her own; "lose no time in availing yourselves of the presence of God's minister to prepare your souls for a sacrament which must be received in a state of grace."

"Oh, my God, I thank Thee!" was the simultaneous exclamation of those two guileless young Christians, in whom earthly passion seemed to be utterly submerged in the solemnity of the sacred rite and the Holiness of Him Whom they worshipped as the Author of all good. They knelt down at a little distance from each other, in deep, heartfelt prayer. After some moments of recollection, they each in turn withdrew to a recess in the cave, where they sought for reconciliation at the feet of God's minister in the tribunal of Penance. This duty being accomplished, others now entered that obscure, temporary sanctuary, and Volumnia felt herself pressed in

her parents' arms. She laid her head, like a child, on her mother's breast—in that one embrace which to all of us is the only one that invigorates and consoles, that gives life and prolongs it, that has sheltered our childhood and hallowed our maturer years—our first and our last love!

Poor Nemesion was more slow of comprehension ; he had passed through so many scenes and sorrows that he could hardly realise the presence of the beloved child whom he had mourned as dead. It was not until her fair arms had clung round him, and she had bid him pass his hands in her Vestal robes and disordered tresses, not until she had knelt to him, asking his paternal blessing on the union he had intended for her long ago, which his presence was now to sanction, that he at last understood what had taken place, and then, laying his hands on her head : “ Yea, verily, my poor child, do I bless thee, thou who didst keep thy vow faithfully while yet a pagan, accept now from the hands of God the spouse He has sent thee, and be to him faithful and true as a Christian bride”.

The two young people then knelt at the foot of the altar, the minister of God united their destinies, after so many vicissitudes, and received their plighted troth and blessed them, as they bowed down reverently, a spectacle for angels and for men. Claudius registered the marriage vow.

Caution and secrecy ever accompanied the meetings of the Christians, but on this occasion prudence was an imperative duty ; for that youthful pair, exiled, pro-

scribed, condemned to death on their native soil, there was no alternative but flight. All was ready ! Horses, provided that morning, had been kept in readiness in the neighbourhood ; they must ride to Ostia, where they could embark with Reparata for Etruria. Nemesion would fain have gone with them, but his absence from Rome would attract the notice of his numerous friends. The self-devoted Claudius offered himself to escort the fugitives : "No one will observe me," he added, "as I am still wearing my traveller's garb, and with a bale of goods slung before us, we shall look like a party of merchants going on a sea voyage."

"Claudius," interrupted Siona, "you have only returned to Rome this morning, after a long absence ; you require rest ; you must not leave us so soon."

"But I shall return to you, dear lady. Meanwhile, I commend my little Helena to your care."

"We could not have found a guide more worthy of our confidence than he whom Heaven has sent us," interposed Reparata ; "I am right glad of his protection on this anxious journey. And now, my kind hosts, I bid you farewell, with heartfelt thanks for the kindness I have received at your hands ; though I have long prepared for this parting, I do not feel it the less."

"Shall we meet again ?" asked Flora, drawing her friend back for a last word.

"Above !" replied the young Greek, with the calm promptness of inspiration. "Can you, Flora, recall a dream I once related to you at Nicæa ? Do you remember that name which was revealed to me as con-

nected with my doom, and which I inscribed on the wall, while speaking to you? The same vision haunted me last night, and I understood my last hour is not far away. Hark! there is a præfect of the guards whom Philip has reason to fear, and his name is Decius."

Flora shrank from her friend's embrace, for her tone had the solemnity of a prophecy and the affectionate sadness of a farewell. She took off a ring which she always wore on her finger, and passing it on that of Reparata: "Take this with you," she said, "it bears the royal signet, and may shield you from harm. If your presentiments prove true, send back this ring by a trusty messenger, so that I may know when all earthly hopes and fears are over for my friend."

No more passed between them. A few minutes later the brethren were kneeling in prayer for the safety of the fugitives, whose horses' hoofs were heard upon the Appian road.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHO can tell whence retribution will fall? save that in the hour which the Lord hath decreed, all the more terrible if long delayed, He commits His vengeance to an unerring hand. The Emperor Philip continued to reign peaceably, and if sometimes the memory of the past disturbed him, he looked at the boy at his side and ventured to hope that for that little one, at least, a prosperous future was in store, since he had not shared his sin. The Goths were beginning to be spoken of; they arose at first like a little cloud in the distance, insignificant and unnoticed, but containing within itself the elements of fiery destruction, which were one day to burst forth and envelop the world. These barbarians came from Scythia, made their way through Thracia and Mysia, destroying cities and ravaging plains on their path. The senate took measures to oppose them, and elected as captain Marinus, a man experienced in arms and renowned in war. He went out on his mission; but he showed himself the treacherous servant of a master who had himself acted as traitor, and employed all the means in his power to get himself proclaimed Emperor: he succeeded, and the news of his elevation was brought to the senate, where Philip appeared before the assembly to assert his

rights. Decius arose; he had that observant spirit which interprets human things rightly, and he bade his Emperor be of good heart, foretelling that Marinus' triumph would be shortlived and his punishment severe. And verily he had spoken with a prophetic spirit, for the soldiers shortly after turned from their sovereign of a day, and were as prompt in imbruing their hands with his blood as they had been in investing him with the purple. Philip was grateful to the man who had prophesied to him good fortune, and sent Decius to command, with full powers and a great increase of troops. He went, perhaps, without immediate ambition; but there is in the exercise of power a contagious spirit which never leaves a heart as it found it. When the new general appeared in the midst of his soldiers, these, either attracted to him by a sudden impulse of affection, or afraid of the consequences of their late act of rebellion, presented him with the insignia of royalty and gave him the title of Emperor. Decius was prudent; he sent word to Philip that he had been forced to accept this outward semblance of royalty, but that at heart he maintained his allegiance to the Imperial Throne. But who is there that, having himself once acted as traitor, can ever trust others? The Cæsar saw through these wiles, and marched against his rival at the head of a large body of soldiers. Suppressed hatred, the indignation of confidence betrayed, worked within him, and his rage, too warmly expressed, subverted his own purpose. There is a noble instinct in the character of a soldier: he understands

the voice of glory better than that of revenge. The troops despised the chief who showed himself a prey to violent passions; they imagined an Emperor ought to be dignified, impassible, almost divine. They were indignant on finding that he meant to punish the fault of rebellion on the whole army from first to last; that, for their having turned away from him all should suffer, not only death, but torture. Treachery had grown to be an inheritance in those days; it descended from the throne to the subject, and was no longer a blot on the Roman name; the army plotted together, and before they had left Italy, Philip found himself prisoner of the men he had long commanded. They murdered him at Verona, behaving neither as men nor as soldiers, but with the atrocity of barbarians; splitting his head at the mouth and dividing it in two. Perhaps, when he saw himself bound and at their mercy, his fatherly spirit rejoiced that the little boy he so loved was not at his side; perhaps he hoped that the great sin of his life was now expiated, and would not be visited on his son. But an all-just Providence had decreed that the crime committed against his boy-sovereign could only be atoned for by the life of his own child. The Prætorian guards murdered in cold blood the little Philip at Rome, and Decius was proclaimed Emperor Augustus while yet away.

The Roman people had no reason to repent of their choice; the new Emperor was wise, endowed with great talents, and had always administered with justice the many charges committed to his care. As a pagan, he

was a good Prince, but Christians spoke of him as their most dire persecutor: such he was, and, owing to more than one motive, he made it his principle to act in all things in a manner directly opposite to that of his predecessor; he hated the Christians, because he knew Philip to be one of them. Decius was of noble extraction, and came from Lower Hungary. No sooner was he elected Emperor than he gave the command of the troops to Cornelius Licinius Valerian. On his return to Rome he permitted the senate to choose a Censor according to their own will; they conferred the dignity on Valerian, and furthermore associated to Decius his son, as Cæsar and successor. The Emperor continued to give great satisfaction by the wisdom of his government, but his cruelty towards the Christians was ever on the increase.

Again the Goths made themselves masters of the greater part of Thracia and Mysia; Decius marched against them with his son, and giving them a terrible battle, killed 30,000, forcing the rest to take refuge in the mountains. They would have been entirely destroyed, had it not been for a new instance of treachery. The Gothic king sent word that if leave were given to him he would return to his own country, but Decius had all the passes in his hands; he was desirous of punishing the barbarians for having broken the peace, and resolved to surround them by a great number of soldiers, giving the command to one Trebonianus Gallus. This latter, aspiring also to the Roman purple, sent word to the Gothic king, that he might, by dividing his soldiers, secure a passage to one half of them, who could subsequently

attack the Emperor: the treachery succeeded, and Decius' soldiers were cut to pieces. His son, wounded by an arrow, fell before his eyes, but the father only exclaimed that the death of one man could not endanger Rome. As hours went on, however, and he found victory had deserted him, he put spurs to his horse, and, loosening the reins, jumped into a deep ditch where the weight of his arms dragged him down. He probably was carried away by the current, for he was never heard of more.

The Goths had conquered, and the Roman soldiers, ignorant of Gallus' device, and wondering why he remained unmolested, took refuge in his tent and proclaimed him Emperor. As the news spread to Rome, the proclamation was confirmed there, and a peace, the most shameful that had ever been negotiated, was concluded with the Goths: the people that considered themselves masters of the whole world became tributary to the barbarians. The shameful yoke was borne in vain; the Goths, notwithstanding the yearly payment of enormous sums, were never so insolent; they ravaged the provinces of Thracia, Mysia, Thessalia, and Macedon. The Persians followed their example, and re-entered Mesopotamia, but Gallus, careless of Rome's glory, associated to himself his son Bolussenus, yet a child. The Christians suffered greatly under this reign. Gallus reigned but two years; he was killed as he had killed his master, and was succeeded in like manner by his captain general Emilianus.

This was an African, born of humble parents in

Mauritania, and bred to arms from childhood. When writing to acquaint the senate with the dignity he had been raised to by the soldiers, he promised to reconquer all the provinces that had passed into the power of the barbarians. He found himself, however, unable to keep his word, for the troops that were on the Alps under the orders of Valerian revolted against the new Emperor, and refused to confirm the choice of their brothers-in-arms. Emilian's soldiers, faithless to their self-elected master, as they had been to all who preceded him, mutinied. The Emperor looked round for help. He could only see Valerian who bore an unblemished name. He had never courted ambition, and would certainly prove faithful. Emilian despatched a messenger to summon him to his assistance. The general was advanced in years, yet he prepared immediately to obey his sovereign's behest, for he had the old Roman spirit which gloried in the exact fulfilment of duty. With a sternness all the more imposing in one habitually mild, he summoned all his troops around him, addressed them with a calm majesty, which bespoke one born to high deeds, summoned them at their peril to obey the dictates of Rome's senate and Rome's Emperor. The troops, accustomed to hearken to him, forgot their previous disobedience, and all, to a man, promised allegiance.

While they were thus in the first burst of their loyalty he marched them off, over hill and dale, over rivers and mountains, to the succour of Emilianus, but it was too late. He arrived but to find a camp in disorder, and a new deed of iniquity accomplished. The

soldiers quailed with terror when the noble old veteran came before them, with uncovered brow, his white hair blown about by the wind, and, standing at the door of the tent, which bore the royal insignia, asked them in a voice of thunder: "Where was their emperor?"

No one dared to answer.

"You have murdered him," he said in a tone tremulous with indignation, and half hushed, so as to convey the impression that he blushed for the soldiers who had thus stained themselves with a crime.

There was a dead silence, as all stood firm in their serried ranks.

"You answer not," he continued, speaking now louder as his indignation rose; "if I come too late to receive my Emperor's orders, and obey him, I come not too late to revenge his death. Where are the culprits?"

Again no answer, save that all in the first line hung down their heads.

"Are you all guilty?" he asked. "Poor Rome, to have such sons!"

None thought of exculpating themselves or resenting his anger. Was it that they bowed to the superiority of a master spirit, or that the spotless character of the honest veteran commanded their respect, they hardly knew; but, by an impulse which never was thoroughly explained, the chiefs of the army came forward with the insignia they had stripped from their last murdered sovereign; they knelt to Valerian, and, before he had time to repulse the proffered homage, the whole army had confirmed the act by the cry: "*Vivat Caesar in æternum*".

“What is this?” cried the old soldier, as he made a sign to still the deafening shout, and put his hands to his head, more fit for a helmet than a diadem; but before he had time to reflect or to refuse, he was borne aloft on their shoulders, an elected emperor! He struggled at first, then submitted with a strange resignation, and not without a shudder. . . . Was it a prophetic instinct which revealed the future lying in store for him? was it an echo of that whisper which was wont to be uttered by a slave when, in the Roman triumphs, he held a crown over the conquering Cæsar: “Remember, thou art but mortal”?

CHAPTER XXIX.

LUCILLA sat in her mother's darkened *cubiculum*, where Nemesia had for some days been confined to her couch, without any exterior symptoms of disease or any other suffering but the malaria fever, which seems to be exhaled like a subtle poison from the Roman Campagna during the hot summer months. It had seized her debilitated frame, and laid her prostrate. Art had few resources in those days against slow maladies : the patient was either ignorant of the issue, or he awaited it with stoicism, often ending voluntarily a life which it was thought weakness to prolong under suffering. But this was a Christian death-bed, and it was surrounded with Christian sorrow, blended with Christian resignation and sympathy. Lucilla watched alone, for Nemesion could ill disguise his deep feelings so as to preserve an outward appearance of calmness, while the noble heart which had shared with him so many trials was numbering its last beatings. Light was excluded from the chamber, lest it should weary the waning sight of the invalid ; and the blind-born girl loved the obscurity, which, recalling to her that world of darkness she had lived in during childhood, seemed to render more easy the interior communion with her own soul.

On her lap were rolls of parchment, tied with a silken thread; ever and anon she passed her finger over them, as if her practised touch made her divine the contents, but she repressed every movement, even holding back her breath, to listen to that of her sleeping mother. By and by a sigh from the couch showed the invalid had awakened.

“Do you want anything, dear mother? could you not slumber a little longer?”

“No! I am glad to awake, for methinks I saw forms that brought strange fears upon me. . . . My mind is disturbed, Lucilla; would I knew something of Volturnia!”

“Letters from her have reached my father this morning; he brought them in while you were sleeping; here they are, that is, only part of them,” she corrected herself, with that strict regard for truth which had always characterised her. “These letters relate all that concerns herself, the rest we shall hear later.”

“Has any harm befallen her?” asked the mother anxiously.

“None! she is in good health, and Icilius makes it his care that she should know nothing but happiness.”

“Then I am happy too. Tell me more, Lucilla.”

“She speaks of the country she inhabits, where Christianity is known, and the Etrurians, ever famed for their piety towards pagan gods, seem to have embraced truth with laudable zeal. She describes the beautiful fields where purple lilies bloom, and the corn extends its golden harvest as far as the eye can reach,

and the mulberry trees serve to nourish numerous tribes of those wondrous insects whose spinning produces light and beautiful tissues such as a Cæsar alone may wear. From the Fesulean town she inhabits she looks down on these riches of Etruria ; but her home is on the hill, where another Rome in miniature reminds her of the past, where the walls are built of huge stones, in Roman fashion, and a theatre, a Forum, and aqueducts bear witness to the people's civilisation,—where, too, God be praised, the Christian religion is more openly practised than with us, and where, in the counsels of a learned bishop, Romolo, she finds much to comfort her soul, entirely healed now from its old wounds."

The sick mother had been listening with clasped hands, while tears of gratitude silently coursed down her cheeks. "My God, I thank Thee," she cried, "all my life long I have asked but one thing, alike from the pagan divinities I foolishly believed in, and from Thee, since I have known Thee, my Christian God ; my prayer is granted now, my child is happy, I am willing to die."

"Mother," cried Lucilla, hiding her face in the rich coverlet to stifle her sobs, "mother, she is not your only child."

"Pardon me, Lucilla," said her dying parent in a voice which was growing very weak, but which she endeavoured to render audible, "I trust in you, my noble true-hearted child, and, when I shall be called away by a decree from above, I know you will be equal to the task I leave to you. You see I am dying, Lucilla ; let us speak of the future calmly, as becomes Christians."

The girl felt her mother's hot hand growing suddenly moist to the touch ; she hoped it was a good sign, and composed herself to listen quietly.

"You have ever been your father's favourite child ; will you accept the charge of consoling him when I am gone ?"

The words were uttered distinctly, but with effort. Lucilla could not trust herself to answer.

"Will you take my place by his side, and bear in mind you have a double duty to do ?"

"I will, mother, but you *must* live a little longer."

Nemesia had collected all her energy for this appeal, and the strain overtaxed her frame ; she sank back exhausted, and her mind began to wander. A little after she spoke again. "Happy like her sister," she murmured, . . . "no ! . . . to higher souls a higher destiny . . . my new-found God !"

Again she closed her eyes and slumbered ; again Lucilla watched, but this time she was surprised at the length of that deep sleep. She went to call her father, and brought him in by the hand, noiselessly. He stood on the threshold, listened, approached the couch, bent over those lips which were already sealed, and whose sweet breathing he could never more hear. . . . He understood it all, and uttered a cry, terrible as the grief of a strong man that finds vent, and fled the chamber.

Lucilla followed him, not allowing herself time for her own tribute of tears. She laid her hand on his arm ; the light touch calmed him at once, and he looked at her sorrowfully, reproaching himself with having

forgotten her feelings in giving way to his own. "You must come with me," she said, and he suffered her passively to lead him back to the house. She stopped on the threshold, and, pointing in the direction of the death-chamber: "I have promised *her*," she said, "that I would perform a double duty by you, holding her place and mine. Will you accept the pledge?"

The tribune raised her in his arms, just as he had done his wife the first day she crossed his threshold, then kissed those eyes, so lately open to the light of day, and the torrent of grief in his heart overflowed—father and child wept. When Lucilla saw her afflicted parent more calm, she asked him whether he wished to quit the house at once, according to the traditions of the old Romans, who left all the last duties to be performed by slaves, or whether he preferred following the Christian custom, of watching and praying by the dead till they were deposited in their last resting-place?

"Let us act, my child," he replied, "in the manner most conformable to our religion; let us remain faithful at our post."

And thus it was done. Nemesia's mortal remains were composed to rest by the hands of those who loved her, and her Christian friends accompanied her to her Christian grave. It was a quiet funeral, in harmony with her simple, unobtrusive nature. A marble slab with the short inscription, "*Nemesia, in pace*," marked the place where she was laid to sleep, among her brethren in the faith.

It often happens in a Christian household that an

unwonted calm steals over the survivors of a sad bereavement. Nemesion and Lucilla returned from the Catacombs with feelings of peaceful reverence, akin to happiness, which they communicated to each other with surprise. "It must be that she is with the blessed, my father, so let us thank God; and now, on our return home, will you read to me my sister's letters?"

"Very true," replied the tribune, "our sorrow during the last days had well nigh absorbed us. I quite forgot you had only heard part of Volumnia's news. Come to me in my *biblioteca* and let us have a long conversation together."

Accordingly when the friends who had followed the funeral had accepted some refreshments under Nemesion's roof and taken their departure, after renewing their expressions of condolence with the mourners, Lucilla sought her father, as agreed upon, placed herself on a little stool at his feet, leaned her head on her hands in an attitude of attention, and, when the tribune saw those loving eyes fixed on him, he felt there was much left for him to cling to here below.

Volumnia's letters contained pages full of melancholy details, apart from the pleasant descriptions with which they had begun. Reparata, her friend and adviser during the first months of her exile, had worked much towards God's glory in her new sphere, in the midst of a people thirsting for religious faith. She had extended among them the kingdom of her Heavenly Father, as she had done in Nicæa, when she laboured with her uncle Pontius. Here, all the poor and infirm of the

Fesulean hills learned to know the young Greek who brought comfort to their homes. She taught them to pray, led many to baptism, and frequently would follow the market people as they went down to sell their produce in the town of Florentia in the plain. Its inhabitants were a warlike people, and the temple of Mars reared high its dome in their small, only half-built city. Reparata would fearlessly take her stand at the door of that edifice, and speak so nobly and truthfully of the One God that the hearts of her audience were touched. Attracted by the sight of a foreign girl speaking their tongue with elegance, and adapting to it much of the poetical knowledge acquired in her native land—for Reparata was highly gifted—they liked her at first for her beautiful language, and they learned to love the good news she taught. They went away believing in Jesus, and they returned to listen to that girl, but they entered that temple no more.

Her fame spread farther. One day a pagan mother, maddened with grief because her child had fallen into the river and been brought back to her drowned, was going to take him to the soothsayers, and offer him to their gods if he could be restored by magic. Reparata stopped her on her way, took the child from her, covered it with her veil, and kneeling down near it, prayed for a long time as one inspired. When she arose, her face was lit up with the mysterious glow of devotion; she took up the little body with the conviction that she had been heard, and lo ! it was alive !

From that day the creed she taught made great pro-

gress in the hearts of her hearers. They surrounded her with a loving respect which almost amounted to worship ; they thought her a prophetess, and bade her foretell the future. She laughed, and the only answer she would give them was : “ You that adore the god of war will one day be among the most peaceful disciples of my God ; the emblem of your city will be a lily, and your patron he who baptised nations in the name of Jesus ”.

And they too laughed, shaking their heads incredulously ; and they thought that, after all, she had only woman’s wit, but could not foretell the future. Volumnia knew all this only by hearsay ; she dared not join her companion in her public life lest she might come under the gaze of any one from Rome, who possibly might know her story. She lived retired in the house her husband had chosen for her, happy in his love.

One day Philip’s general, Decius, passed through Etruria on his way to combat the usurper Marinus. For a few days he halted among the vineyards of that favoured land to procure some rest for his followers. No one feared them ; were they not Cæsar’s soldiers ? and therefore welcome to Etruria ! But that night, when Reparata returned to her home on the hill, under Volumnia’s roof, she was pale and agitated, and henceforth she would never go out alone. For a long time she refused to tell what had troubled her, but at last she confided to her friend that, as she consorted as usual with the people in the market-place, soldiers had mingled in the throng of her bearers, and on her way

home she was wearied by the importunities of one whose dress bespoke him of higher rank ; he spoke to her of love, and told her his name was Decius ; she had fled and escaped from him, but never would expose herself to meet him again. Shortly after a message from her uncle had called her to join him in Nicæa, and she bade her friends farewell as if for ever ! Again Rome's destinies were changed ; the Empire had a new master, and Decius wore the imperial purple, stained anew with the blood of the master he had slain. Volumnia did not receive any tidings of her friends after she left them, but the rumour reached her of new persecutions undergone by her Christian brethren in all parts of the Empire, for the new Cæsar's accessions gave rise to one of the most implacable storms the Church had yet passed through. For herself she sought more than ever privacy and silence, and knew nothing of the world's event, save when a traveller came one day from Nicæa bearing news to her husband of the sufferings of the Christians there, —how a holy man of the name of Pontius had been exposed to wild beasts in the amphitheatre, how the lions had licked his feet and refused to devour him whom God had marked as His own, like another Daniel ; how his executioners had conveyed him to the summit of a rock, there cut off his head, and thrown it into the sea, but as the waves closed over it a supernatural light illumined the spot where it had fallen, for that man was a saint.

Icilius and Volumnia asked the traveller whether he had heard anything of the niece of the venerable Pontius,

but he did not know Reparata even by name. However, they did not wait long for tidings of her, for two months later, when the autumn blush was on the vines, and the Etrurians went in boats down the river to sell their fruit at the sea-side, they saw towards evening a streak of light on the water. They passed on, taking it for a moonbeam, but it only shone the more as they drew near, and saw it was a shroud ; but it did not chill the heart of the mariners, as such sights generally do ; it looked transparent, and it diffused a refulgent light. They took it into their boat, and a halo settled above. They bore it to where the river Arno passed in the heart of the town ; they called for pure, consecrated hands to bear the burden to shore ; it was uncovered, and people came round, and they saw within the body of a woman modestly veiled. The head was severed, and long locks clotted with gore had been washed in the stream, but there was nothing about her of the hideousness of death. All who gazed on those features knew her, the girl-teacher who had sat among them so long, imparting to them the teachings of her Heavenly Master ; and while she lay there, brought back by a strange destiny to the gates of that temple she had hallowed in life, their love for her grew into devotion, and they revered her. For three days and nights a halo surrounded her, and when it faded away, they buried in their midst the maiden who had returned to those she loved, and all those present who were bound to her by the ties of spiritual affection exchanged one with another the pledge of a holy oath ; they vowed they would not rest till a monu-

ment of their love and veneration had been raised to the pure-minded maiden who had spread among them the light of faith, which would henceforward shine from her grave ; they vowed that the first Christian temple raised in Etruria should bear the hallowed name of Reparata, and it was so. Both at Pisa, where her body followed the course of the river, and at Florence, her last resting-place, the glorious pile of the Duomo bears that spotless name, inscribed on its portals, as all travellers may see.

Volumnia's letter had come to a close ; it had brought to both father and child the best solace they could find in that sad hour. When the tribune had done reading, he folded his arms on his breast and remained silently absorbed in thought. Lucilla laid her head on his knee, and wept with hushed sobs.

By and by she arose : " I must go to my mother's death chamber," she said.

" Wait a little longer, dear one, I would speak to you."

" My father !"

" Lucilla, you are now my only joy ; I feel a mysterious yearning at my heart, yet I will not follow it till you consent."

" My father, I am your child and handmaiden ; your least wish is my law."

" You have taken your lost mother's place at this hearth, and, therefore, I will honour you as well as love. You know, little one, that many of our brethren have given their goods to the poor, and devoted themselves to God's service. I have much wealth at my command, and the Gospel says, ' It is easier for a camel to pass

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven'."

"I think I understand you."

"Not yet! You know not, dear one, how painful it is to a nature like mine, naturally a lover of truth, to awake from a delusion, after following all my life what I thought the right path. How painful it is to find that, while fulfilling my duty sternly, I was simply participating in injustice, and steeping my hands in Christian blood; if not directly, I have at least done so indirectly, in carrying out the Imperial commands. And now, although baptism and repentance have, I trust, cleansed my soul, yet a longing desire for expiation has arisen within me. Willingly would I renounce all I have, leaving it in the hands of my agent, Sempronius, to be administered for you, and then devote myself to the ministry of the altars. It seems to me that God has manifested His Will to that effect in calling away my beloved wife."

"And you would renounce for yourself the danger of riches, father, and leave me to their poisonous contact?" she asked, her cheeks glowing, and her eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

"All are not called, Lucilla, to follow the Lamb in voluntary poverty."

"But *I* am!" she replied solemnly. "Long ago would I have joined my Christian sisters, sharing their lowly duties, had I not thought the Lord had appointed my task for me in the narrow circle of home. Father, the Church of Christ admits of deaconesses to minister

to the poor, even as the holy women of the Gospel attended on the Saviour in His mortal life. If Nemession, the tribune, bow his nature to serve Jesus in lowliness, then must Lucilla be by his side."

He folded her in his arms, but kept her still at a little distance from him, looking into her eyes wistfully. "Are you quite sure you will not regret this step, my child, for you are young and fair, and have nothing to expiate as I have?"

"My father, I am resolved in this, that nothing but death shall ever separate me from you. Send away from our desolate home the riches that perish, and let us place our treasures where neither rust nor moth can consume."

He kissed her on the forehead tenderly, yet piously, as we press our lips to an object that is no longer ours but God's, and said solemnly, "Be it so !"

They were silent a little while. "Would it be possible, think you, father, for me to see Volumnia again?" she enquired hesitatingly.

He reflected a few moments : "After the great sorrow that has fallen on our household, it is urgent that you and your sister should meet ; yet she cannot revisit the Rome that spurned her and thinks her dead. I shall send you to Etruria under the care of Sempronius ; you will have thus more time for reflection, and complete liberty to choose your lot between her and me."

"Ah, father ! you want to try me, but my choice is irrevocable. However, I accept your offer. I shall go to spend some time with Volumnia, live over again the

years of our love, and then return to your side to fill the place my mother has left void."

"May God's blessing rest on my beloved child, now and for ever."

After a few days passed in seclusion and mourning, there was in the house of the tribune Nemesion a busy stir and much going to and fro, as if preparations were being made for a journey: goods and furniture were removed, and neighbours could hear the sound of *sestertia* counted over, and over again. Yet the tribune remained in his house after it had grown bare, but his system of life was strangely changed.

CHAPTER XXX.

ROME had grown weary of her own corruptions and of her weakness. Two remedies suggested themselves, and were immediately called into action: it was determined upon to revive the censorship, and to persecute the Christians. It was hoped that, by the first, order and good customs might be revived in the habits of social life; it was imagined that, by the second, the national religion would be restored to its ancient purity, and that Rome might regain the favour of the gods. The death of Decius prevented the new censor Valerian from exercising an authority which could scarcely have produced any beneficial change; but the evil that men do lives after them, and the pagan zealots had already taken advantage of the Imperial edict—Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem had to bewail the martyrdom of their bishops, Fabianus, Babylas, and Alexander.

When the election of Valerian became known in Rome, it was confirmed with great joy, and Gallienus, his elder son, was at once appointed Cæsar, and successor to the new Emperor.

Valerian was seventy years of age: the ravages of time were distinctly marked on a brow that had long worn the laurels of victory; his life had been an honoured one, his name was a byword of justice and

peace. Who more fit to wear the Roman purple? Who more certain to inaugurate a happy and peaceable reign? But "there is a tide in the affairs of men," and Valerian was destined to wash out in bitter tears of shame and remorse the many blood stains with which crime and persecution had covered the Roman purple. His first step was to elect for his captains those men who had signalised themselves in the wars with the Parthians, the Persians, and Goths, and shown themselves worthy of trust. For himself, he chose the command of the army directed against Persia, as being the most important. Sapor, the Persian king, had previously occupied some of the Imperial provinces, and, in order to oppose the Emperor, supported an audacious usurper named Coriades, who had already made himself master of Cæsarea, Antioch, and other places. This man's triumph, however, was of short duration; he was killed by his own soldiers. Valerian, in the beginning of his reign, was so favourable to Christians, that it was whispered the new religion had penetrated the palace precincts, and the brethren became less cautious. This respite, however, was but of short duration. Valerian, in his intercourse with the East, had imbibed a taste for necromancy, and was so influenced by the magi of that country as to draw them to Rome. These, finding their art and its malefices unsuccessful in the renewed atmosphere of the Empire, where Christianity was beginning to breathe, complained that a contrary God disturbed their sacrifices, and alas! for that blind craving, that thirst for more which takes possession of the heart that

has once tasted of sin ! Valerian turned away from the light that had begun to dawn on the Empire, and ordered that fiery persecution which has been registered in the Annals of the Church as the eighth !

The scene lies again on the Via Appia, where the reader has followed us so often. It is a summer night there are persons walking on the road, for the sultry air has been oppressive all day, and the atmosphere has that refreshing sweetness which brings renewed vigour to the exhausted frame. There are some among those stalwart Romans who, though accustomed to the climate from their infancy, sink nevertheless each season under its enervating influence, and it is only the night air that can bring increased rapidity to the circulation of their languid blood ; it is then their step grows elastic and their tread firm. As they issued in groups from Porta Carpentana, out on the public road, it was curious to see how their strength increased with the exercise.

But these were not the sole passers-by on the lonely way at that late hour. The Via Appia was, as we have said before, the Christians' road to the Catacombs, and here and there were stationed the trusty sentinels of a persecuted creed, the poor, the maimed, the beggar, who, living on public charity, could unblushingly look up into a Christian's face, and call him brother !

As the promenaders all belonged to the better class, they were escorted by slaves who bore torches in front of and behind them, and these were in sufficient number to cast a good light on the road in that bright, clear atmosphere of Southern Italy. The Christians

passed through these groups unnoticed, or if any of their pagan friends recognised them, they supposed them engaged in the same pastime as themselves. A preconcerted sign, known but to a few, was exchanged between them and the faithful poor who were on the lookout, and this sufficed to warn the visitors to the pious rendezvous that they could go on in safety.

The mendicants formed in those days a large class, of which the type still exists in modern Rome, as travellers know to their cost ; there was therefore nothing unusual in seeing them disseminated along the road, four or five between each milestone. Among them, however, was one who shifted his place continually, and, more facetious than is the wont of his tribe, never wearied in saluting each and all of his fellow beggars as he went from one milestone to another, and scanned them all narrowly.

“Methinks you have only lately taken to this road, friend,” observed one of his neighbours ; “I never saw you before, or perhaps you are a stranger to Rome.”

“I am a Roman by birth, but have been away for a long time ; during my absence I got myself instructed in the Christian religion, and have been admitted into your ranks.”

This was an unusual mode of imparting confidence on the part of a complete stranger, although he did belong to the free and easy tribe of beggars ; but there was something about him which seemed inexplicable altogether, and the Christian he had addressed was on his guard, answering shortly : “So much the better for you”.

"Happy, indeed, for me! Are you an old Christian, brother?"

"I was born one!"

"Happier still! there are men of great virtues and talents among the Christians. I have heard of one Adrias, and would fain look upon his face."

"What! do you not know him? Then you must be a new Christian, indeed!"

"Oh, I have heard a great deal about him; I believe he is very intimate with a philosopher who lives somewhere about here in an old excavation."

"Shall I take you to him?"

"Another time; this is an undue hour."

The mysterious beggar shifted his place again; perhaps he felt overawed at the cold civility of his companion, perhaps he feared to commit himself; he had evidently some object in view, which it was his interest to conceal. By and by he returned with a curious limping gait.

"You seem to have hurt yourself, brother," asked the first mendicant in kind, compassionate tones.

"I think I have found out the cave of the philosopher. I stepped up on a detached paving-stone to get a better view and lost my footing; I have hurt my ankle."

"You ought to have asked for admission, you would have been welcome; but when I offered to lead you there, you refused."

"I thought it was further off than it is; see, here is one coming from that very cave; who is that?"

“That is Adrias, whom you were enquiring about.”

As they spoke, the citizen in question passed before them out on the road ; the moon shone full on his face, revealing noble lineaments ; the beggar looked at him steadily, let him go on a little, then, bidding his companion an abrupt good-night, trudged after Adrias with a brisk step which seemed to denote his lameness had been only assumed.

Adrias had partially covered his head with his *toga*, as if to shelter himself from the night air, but it was in reality to escape recognition from any chance friends who might be enjoying a walk in the moonlight that night ; he was thoughtful and had much to commune with himself, when, to his surprise, he was accosted by one who greeted him by name. He had passed many persons, who could this be that knew him ? He turned round to enquire. No one was in sight but a cripple leaning on a long stick.

“Did you call, friend ?” enquired Adrias, checking the momentary impatience he felt at being stopped, and modulating his tone to that of charity with which the Christians ever addressed the unfortunate. “Can I aid you in anything ?”

“I am houseless and a wanderer,” replied the man.

“You speak like a Roman,” answered Adrias, scanning him narrowly, “and you know my name ; you cannot be a stranger.”

The beggar winced under the cool scrutiny, but answered promptly : “I mean that I am an outcast from my own home for the sake of the Christian religion

which I have embraced. I laboured hard to support my family when I was strong and healthy ; now that I am infirm and a Christian they reject me, lest I should draw down on them the rigour of the laws."

"Then it becomes my duty to succour you." Once more he looked at the sinister countenance with an undefined suspicion, but he chid himself for the involuntary feeling, saying to himself: "If this man have an ugly face, he is only to be pitied the more. Friend," he continued aloud, "follow me and you shall have food and shelter."

The man obeyed, uttering his thanks in a whining tone, and multiplying flattering epithets in praise of his benefactor.

"Hush," said Adrias ; "we Christians do not use such compliments ; I see you are but new to our customs."

The beggar spoke no more till they reached Adrias' house within the city ; the streets were deserted at that hour, the moon rode high in the heavens, and, by her light, Adrias could see the ill-omened face of his companion grow more and more gloomy, till it settled into a lowering expression. Ever and anon he could meet the furtive glance directed towards himself, and wondered what this man could be. They had now reached Adrias' house, and the master's signal brought the porter to the door, together with the faithful mastiff appointed guardian of each Roman threshold ; but the animal, instead of leaping up at his master's call, as was his wont, uttered a low, savage growl, and walked round the strange beggar, scenting him and snarling with evident dissatisfaction.

They did not heed him at first, but when Adrias had entered, and made a sign to the cripple to follow him, the mastiff rose on his hind paws and barked furiously, wheeling about, lying down, then starting up, he seemed to be bent on defending the threshold at all points, and showed his teeth at the stranger with a defiant howl.

“What is the matter?” asked Adrias; “is this dog going mad? I never saw him thus before.”

“One would think he had gone to the woods and seen a wolf,” answered the porter, “but he has not been out of my sight one moment this day; he dined with me, and was as usual docile as a child.”

“You must watch him and see if he grows worse, poor Pollua; hold him tight whilst this brother is passing, or he will fly at him.”

The antipathy seemed to be mutual, for the cripple darted from under his bushy eyebrows such a look at his opponent as seemed calculated to draw on him the “evil eye,” as it is yet termed in Italy; but the dog merely resented the insult offered to his discernment by a contemptuous sniff and a suppressed growl; he could do no more, since the stranger had already entered the house. The servants came forward to greet their master; he bid them care for the beggar, and withdrew himself to the *aula* to commune with his wife and children. Maia and Eone nestled at his feet and asked what he had brought from their uncle, the hermit, when suddenly an undefined tumult from without interrupted their converse. Adrias rose and went out, promising to return in a few minutes, but his absence

grew so much prolonged that Paulina became uneasy ; she knew the edict of persecution was in force, and feared lest soldiers had been sent to seek Adrias ; she took up Maia in her arms, and, holding Eone by the hand, went out to meet her lord in the hall.

She saw no soldiery as she had expected, but all her slaves were there assembled ; part of them, grouped round Adrias, clung to his garments, some for shelter, others with a view to defend him, and at his feet crouched a form which it was difficult to define as human—a man in shape, but cowering like an animal under the rod, rubbing his mouth in his garments to wipe the foam that curdled at his lips ; his hands, agitated with convulsive movements, were turned in their sockets and presented their palms outwardly ; the eyes, distorted, showed the white alone of the eye-ball ; and from this mass of deformed humanity, now coiled up like a heap of soiled garments, now distended and beating the marble pavement with its head until blood gushed from the nostrils, now leaping like a wild animal caught in a net and struggling for life, from that shape, half man, half demon, there was heard to issue one of those fits of laughter which we can imagine to be uttered but by the damned, and ever and anon he shrieked, “ Save me ! I am surrounded by fire ! ”

All quailed at the sight ; even Adrias’ cheek was blanched, for he understood the fearful import of the scene. “ Is there no one here that has power over him ? ” he asked ; “ he is possessed by the Evil One.”

Little Maia, lifted up in her mother’s arms, looked

down with strange security on that sight which made stout men tremble. "I am not afraid," she said, "let me go near him; I have seen my uncle Hippolytus cast out a devil; he is an exorcist, you know; you should send for him."

The maniac, who had hurled himself to the ground when they tried to bind him, now writhed along the pavement in the direction of the child, as if the innocent voice attracted him, as that of the charmer does the wily serpent; his convulsed eyes could not see, but he raised towards Maia his distorted hands. "Save me!" he cried, "for I am surrounded by fire."

Oh, the agonies of that man! it was fearful and loathsome to see how God's noblest work could be thus subjected to an infernal enemy, and degraded below the vilest animal! Vainly they tried to relieve him; there was fire for him in the very breath of all who drew near him. He recoiled from their touch; only when Maia approached he ceased to be tormented, and lay, writhing still, but hushed, displaying thus the power of innocence over evil.

Towards morning they followed the child's suggestion, and sent a messenger to Hippolytus, the hermit of the wayside. Charity effected what no amount of persuasion had ever succeeded in bringing about. To succour a suffering brother the hermit left his cave, and, for the first time since he had embraced a solitary life, visited his brother's home. He had gone out from that house in the pride of youth and the vigour of health; he returned to it an aged man in appearance,

for penance and hardship had done the work of years ; but the heart that beat within him was true and warm as it had been in early days, and the firm step with which he crossed the threshold of the home of his boyhood had the elasticity of youth and the noble bearing of his race.

He was led into the presence of the demoniac, who, appalled by the Great Power he felt nigh, grew faint and exhausted. The hermit knelt down to pray, and the fiend, hurling his victim upwards, cast him like a paving-stone against the kneeling man. The vigorous frame of Hippolytus resisted the shock ; he rose and touched with his stole the poor creature, who shrank from the contact, as if seared by it. All those present united in fervent prayer ; then the exorcist raised his voice, and, in the words the Church has set apart for the rite, invoked the mercy of God on that soul, subjected to the demon ; he called upon that Jesus Who had relieved all those possessed that came to Him, and Who had conferred the same power on His disciples that believed in Him, that so He would deign, even now, to manifest His Greatness and work a miracle through his unworthy servant. And the humble prayer was heard, for, when Hippolytus made the sign of the cross, throwing holy water on the man's head, a sound passed out among them, which some likened to the hissing of a serpent, others to the slaking of a fire that has been extinguished, and the demoniac lay pale, trembling, almost lifeless, on the floor. The first impression was that he was dead, but, in the midst of the

terrified silence that had fallen upon all beholders, he dragged his bruised body to the place where Adrias stood, and, remaining prostrate, uttered in hardly audible accents : “ Pardon and mercy, for I am a guilty man ! ” All were still under the impression of the fearful scene which had taken place, and no one tried to help him. Little Maia pulled her father’s *toga*, and pointed to the man at his feet. He understood the mute request. “ I know not what thou hast done,” he said, “ but may God forgive thee, whatever be the crime.”

And the poor shattered man wept aloud, and those who gazed on that wreck of humanity wept too, and the angels who looked down petitioned for pardon, perhaps for him whom his brethren had forgiven.

“ I deserve all I have suffered ; I meant to betray you and your household. I shall confess all ; but oh ! promise me the pardon of your God, and teach me to know Him, for I have felt His power.”

“ To him who repents pardon is already secured ; who and what art thou ? ”

“ Not what I feigned to be. I am Maximus, the secretary of the tribunals, who, commissioned by the enemies of the Christians to discover the members of that sect, and, hearing that Adrias was suspected, disguised myself to discover and apprehend him. Yours is indeed a great God Who could divine my purpose. I watched for Adrias on the Appian road ; I saw you too, oh, my benefactor,” he continued, turning to Hippolytus ; “ you were in a lonely cave teaching your doctrines ; oh, take me as your disciple, for I am humbled even

to the dust of the road side, and I long to know your God."

"He who has cured thee through my means," replied Hippolytus, "bids me continue my work, that thus thou mayest glorify His name; but thou must first repair the wrong done to this house, and tell how far thou hast betrayed."

"I have not executed my foul intention," replied the penitent; "the noble Adrias is secure as far as concerns me: your God struck me down in time. But I warn you that the wealth of this mansion is known, and the minions of the law are on the watch, seeking the first pretext to seize upon the master of the house, and confiscate his property; it will be well for the whole family to absent themselves for a time, leaving their affairs in safe hands, and that as soon as possible, for I shall not return to those who sent me, they will set an enquiry on foot, and most likely seek for me here."

"We cannot leave Rome," said Adrias, "for many reasons, but we might retire to your cave, Hippolytus, if you will shelter us for a few days till we see what course to pursue."

"Come then, brother! God grant that the hermit of the way-side may shield from all harm the brother of his love. We know not what are the designs of Providence. Let some of your slaves come with me now, bringing all that is needful to render the poor hermitage habitable. Till this evening then, farewell, I shall go on before you to prepare. Maximus, you may come to me for instruc-

tions when you like ; you have received your first severe lesson from a higher Master than I am. What, little ones," he continued, as Eone and Maia clung to him, and barred the way ; " will you not let me go ? "

" Oh, take us with you, Uncle," they cried, " we love your cave so much ! "

Their mother asked him to comply with their request, the more so that she had much to attend to before leaving her house, and they went out together from that home for the last time.

Hippolytus lingered on the threshold, remembering how he had suffered there in his first sorrow—how affliction had taken him to God ! He thought of *her* who had since been the guardian spirit of his life, Martina, whose pure, spiritualised beauty had first enthralled, and later exalted him, whose death had detached him from all earthly ties. There are stoic spirits who love virtue for her own sake, not so with him ! he had been led to the truth step by step, but all his life he had proved faithful to that first call from Martina's God. The party set out, but ere they had proceeded far on their way Hippolytus called to his side one of the slaves that escorted him, and bade him hold his tablets while he wrote on one of them these words : " There is sorrow and danger in the house of Adrias to-night : be it your task, as ever, to strengthen and console ! Paulina requires the advice and help of a friend."

" Take this," he said, consigning the tablet to his brother's trusty slave, " to the house of him who, in life,

bore the name of Florentius, deliver to his daughter, and return."

Meanwhile the children had run on while Hippolytus was writing, and were nowhere to be seen on the road. He blamed the slaves for not looking after their little masters, but they replied that while he had withdrawn aside and was occupied, a *cisium* (the light, open vehicle most in use for a swift journey) had passed on the road, containing a man and a lady, at which sight Eone and Maia had grown so excited as to clap their hands and call out: the carriage had stopped, and its occupants alighted "And behold them there," they continued, "under shelter of that tomb, embracing our little masters, and lifting them up as if they had a right to them."

Hippolytus hastened to the indicated spot, but before he reached it the maiden traveller had bounded forward, and, seizing his hands with the familiarity of an old friend, "Dear hermit of the way-side," she cried, "have you deserted your cave?"

"Is it you, Lucilla, my dear child? Whence do you come?"

"From Etruria, where my father sent me with our steward, Sempronius, to visit Volumnia."

"Oh the dear one! tell me all about her. Is she happy?"

"Beyond our fondest hopes. She gave me a message for you, Hippolytus. She desired me tell you that every day of her life she thanks God for her sorrows which have brought her so much knowledge of that which is true peace and joy."

"Oh my God ! how wonderful are Thy ways," exclaimed the hermit, clasping his hands as he looked towards Heaven, then reverently bowing his head remained silent for a moment before addressing his young friend :

"And you, Lucilla, I have not seen you since your bereavement ; are you somewhat consoled, dear child, for the loss of the best of mothers ? Methinks I see in your expressive eyes, whose first opening to light I witnessed, a something which speaks of peace and of high-minded noble resolve."

"Yes," she answered in calm tones, though her cheek kindled with enthusiasm, and she explained to him the path she and her father had chosen to themselves through life.

"May He Who has begun His Work in you perfect it unto the end," exclaimed Hippolytus ; "but who will henceforth administer the vast property of Nemesion ?"

"Sempronius !" she replied ; "he has been faithful to us for many years, he will be equally faithful to God and to the poor. Our journey to Etruria was not merely undertaken for my sole pleasure ; the bulk of my father's property is now lodged with Volumnia. It is agreed upon between us that I am to go to see her once in three months, and Sempronius will also come with me to transact business."

"Who ever heard of such travelling !"

"Oh, but our good steward has bought such a beautiful *cisium* ; it goes fifty-six miles in ten hours, and he is *cisiarius* to it himself."

“ It does me good to hear your happy talk ; but I must leave you, Lucilla, I have weighty work on hand.”

“ What is the matter ? My little friends began telling me strange news ; they said they were going to live with you, and their parents were to follow.”

He informed her hurriedly of all that had taken place.

“ Oh, go ! ” she cried , “ why did you not tell me sooner ; I have been detaining you by my idle talk. I shall go to my father at once, and he will find out some plan for the safety of his friend. Sempronius, who has so well directed our affairs, may be of use to your brother. Farewell, Hippolytus, pray for me and mine.”

She knelt to him that he might invoke on her the blessing of God, and he placed his hands on her beauteous eyes, closed now in prayer as he had seen them closed by blindness, and he prayed that she might never see the iniquities of the world he had fled from, that if she were exposed to lose the purity of her soul, death might visit her first.

CHAPTER XXXI.

“YOU are more gaily dressed than is your wont, Flora; methought you would have put on mourning.”

“For the death of my friend, mother; oh, no! I rejoice, rather, for martyrdom was the wish of her heart, and all these memorials of her which Lucilla has brought do not occasion sorrow to me. I receive them as tokens of the bridal feast to which she is gone!”

And Flora knelt down before the chest which Lucilla had brought from Etruria, in which Volumnia had collected all that had belonged to Reparata, and, as the articles of raiment were taken out one by one and laid on the floor, she sighed, yet took pleasure in unfolding them. There were trinkets, too, of exquisite workmanship, which the young Greek had kept, less in remembrance of her former high station than as fond relics of the parents she had lost. Some of these Flora put away, others she added to her own jewels. A very little girl was by her side, who played with everything she saw as a toy; more than once her innocent sport had made Flora smile, driving back the tears she gave to the memory of her friend. Some rolls of parchment written in Reparata's hand met her eye; she grew engaged in

the perusal, and forgot the child, till a sudden noise made her start ; the little thing had got hold of the polished silver mirror on Siona's table, and amused herself with looking at the reflection of her own face, when a word of reproof from Siona frightened her, and she let the mirror fall, crying with all her might in her childish terror.

Flora did not seek to soothe her, but looked grave, and said : " Helena has been disobedient : she has taken in her hands the mirror she was forbidden to touch ".

The child was too young to speak, but understood the admonition ; she nodded her curly head, and put her little hands together.

" Thou art sorry, and wilt do it no more. That is right ! then I forgive thee. Dost thou love me, Helena ? "

The baby answer was soon delivered ; she put her tiny arms round Flora's neck, and gave and received the kiss of peace.

" Whom dost thou love most of all, Helena ? "

The well-taught little one pointed up to Heaven, then laid her hand on her breast.

" Yes, Helena, you must love with all your heart God, your Father in Heaven ; it is He who has marked you with that bloody cross, His own sign on His own child ; " and taking Helena in her arms, she pressed her pure lips to the cross engraved on the little heart, as a mysterious prophecy.

She set her down again ; and the child picked up a small roll which had fallen from the chest. Flora, on unfolding it, found within an onyx ring, finely carved.

She looked at it with a smile of recognition ; then put it on her own finger.

“This was the gift of Gordianus to me,” she said ; “may God pardon the blindness of his poor pagan mind for the sake of the mercy he showed to Christians.”

“Those who have gone before us died in time, Flora,” observed her mother ; “great are the woes in store for God’s Church.”

“As it has pleased the Lord that we should survive and weather the storm, mother, He will give us strength to be faithful to the end.”

“Alas, dear one, the stay of our house is no more, and I fear for Laurentius ; he is so impetuous—he will never have the prudence to dissemble—they will take him from us, a willing victim for his faith. I shall die of grief ; and then, who will hold you up ?”

“The God of Cecilia, of Martina, and of Reparata,” she replied, standing with clasped hands and uplifted gaze. “See, mother, what it is to trust in Him ! Tyrants threw Reparata into the sea ; and He willed her body to be honoured, for it had been the temple of the Holy Ghost. His light shone on the waves till men came and took her to that grave, where she was to rest in glory.”

“You are right, daughter ; we ought and must place our trust in God alone. Meanwhile, let us do all we can for our distressed brethren. Has Claudius returned yet from Hippolytus’ cave ? He will tell us whether we can do anything more for Adrias and Paulina.”

“Mother, hark ! do you not hear the voice of some

one from without, calling me by name? I do not recognise the accents; who can it be?"

As she spoke Lucilla came in precipitously, her hair dishevelled and her apparel in disorder; she was weeping bitterly: "Help me, help me," she cried, "for they are gone!"

Flora opened her arms to receive her; Siona was too much alarmed to stir. She remembered how, on a former occasion, Lucilla had thus entered that room—which had been once to herself a bridal chamber, and ever since a sanctuary of domestic joys—entered it, alas! a messenger of woe!

"Whom are you speaking of?" asked Flora; "we shall do all we can to relieve your distress."

"My father, my father," sobbed out the poor girl; "oh, why did I leave him? how wrong and selfish of me to do so! During my absence it appears that enquiries were set on foot about his new mode of life. He did not tell me this on my return, for he would not frighten me; and I was so happy when, this morning, sitting at his feet with my head on his knees, as I had so often done as a little child, I repeated to him all the particulars of my journey, and talked of my sister. He enjoyed our conversation so much; but suddenly we heard a great noise outside, then the tread of soldiers. We started up; a slave rushed in and whispered to my father: 'Sempronius bids you fly; he will defend our dear young mistress'. My father caught me in his arms, but I implored him to seek for safety in flight, lest we should both perish; and I resolutely pushed

him away. I did not wait long before Sempronius entered; but alas! not free to defend me as he had promised. He was a prisoner; and the soldiers stood on either side of him holding his chains. ‘Close your eyes,’ he whispered to me in the dialect we had learned in Etruria. I obeyed, and sat down feeling overcome with anguish. They looked at me and said: ‘She is the born-blind girl; she knows nothing, let us leave her’. They looked about the room, complaining that it did not contain any costly furniture or golden vessels; but they put no questions to me, and went away, taking Sempronius with them.

“Now, dear friends, advise me; what shall I do? Where is my father? Ought I to await his return in that house whence the slaves have fled?”

Siona and Flora had listened in breathless anxiety to this sad account: when it was over, the former took to her bosom the poor, motherless, weeping Lucilla. “You did well to come here,” she said, “we will shelter you. Laurentius is sure to bring us news of your father, who has no doubt taken refuge in the Catacombs; perhaps we may be able to take you to him. As to Sempronius, we shall hear of him too, be not afraid! Claudius will watch for him at the tribunals; a Briton, yet a Roman, the edict does not affect him, and he will pass unsuspected.”

“My poor, dear father, when will you take me to him?”

“Not until we have ascertained that we can do so in safety. If it be found out that we are sheltering you, my

son may pay the penalty of the service I would fain render."

"Oh, I shall keep very quiet," sobbed poor Lucilla ; "I shall hide in a corner of your house, asking nothing from men, but all from God. Let me pass this day in solitude and prayer."

Her request was complied with ; she withdrew to Siona's private oratory, where she sank down on her knees, and let every one go and come, pass and repass, heedless of all around her. Night came on ; torches were lit, taking the place of the daylight, which had waned away ; then, at last, Lucilla rose from her long, uninterrupted prayer : her acute hearing revealed to her that another step had crossed the threshold, and she guessed it was some one seeking her. She was not mistaken, for almost immediately Siona entered, introducing her son, who, serious and sad at heart, bore on his countenance the impression of deep grief.

Lucilla looked from one to the other, but neither had the courage to speak first, and bring fresh sorrow to the much-tried girl. At length she herself broke the painful silence :

"Laurentius," she said, "I feel sure you bring me a message."

"I do ; your father is hiding for some days in the Catacombs. When the present search for him comes to an end he intends to resume his life of good works in the service of the poor. You can either join him in his place of concealment or remain here in safety under my mother's roof ; indeed, he advised the latter."

"Oh, Laurentius, you surely do not wish me to follow that advice ; I yearn to go to my beloved parent."

"Be prudent, Lucilla ; be guided by my mother and Flora."

"Have you any news of Sempronius ?" she asked, struck by the expression on the face of Laurentius.

"I have told you all that was necessary."

"I must hear more," she urged. "Remember that, owing to my infirmity, I have been over indulged from childhood upwards, and I can ill brook delay. There is something you are concealing from me. I *must* know what has befallen our faithful steward."

"I fear it is more than you can bear. Be satisfied with praying much for him."

"Suspense is worse ; I entreat you, tell me all."

Laurentius looked at his mother, who simply said : "Do what she asks you," and he resumed : "Sempronius was taken from your house to prison, and given over to the tribune, Olympius, who asked him where your father's goods lay concealed. Sempronius answered, that all his master's fortune had been disposed of, the greater part being in the hands of the poor ; as for himself, though a steward, he did not own the smallest coin, and could call nothing his own but his body, which he would offer up willingly to save his good master. Men are cruel, Lucilla ; they took him at his word. Olympius ordered him to be stretched on the rack and beaten with sticks." . . .

"Oh, my God !" exclaimed Lucilla, stifling a groan, her whole frame quivering with anguish.

"Courage, my child," whispered Siona, taking a seat close to her to support her.

"I was anxious to spare you this pain," interposed Laurentius.

"Do not fear," replied the brave girl. "I am strong, I can bear it." And she folded her arms meekly one on the other, but her hands were clenched.

"While he was under torture," resumed Laurentius, "they brought a golden image of the god Mars to witness his torments, and, while the blows fell on his outstretched, defenceless limbs, bruising and mangling the flesh on his prominent bones, they said to him: 'Sacrifice to our god and thy sufferings shall cease'."

"What was his answer?" asked Lucilla, her voice sinking to a whisper from the intensity of her feelings.

"He scorned the offer, and, though weakened by pain, he raised his voice to address the idol: 'May Jesus Christ crush thee!' and the false god crumbled away at the martyr's breath."

"And then?" asked Lucilla, in the same tremulous accents as before.

"They became afraid, and, having unbound him, strove to heal his wounds. Olympius would not yield, but thought to torture him again to-night, and, instead of that . . . Oh, kind mercy of our God!"

"What happened?"

"Is your heart prepared for forgiveness?"

"Towards those who may injure *me*, yes; but I cannot bear to see sorrow or pain inflicted on those I love. I already feel the wounds of Sempronius burning within

me, even as the tears of Volumnia fell like scalding drops upon my heart."

"I fear that you are not worthy to hear more," said Laurentius.

"My son," observed Siona gently, "do not let your zeal be harsh!"

"Pardon me, mother," he replied respectfully, "in your presence I am nothing but a dutiful son, but I am also appointed a teacher of Christianity ; my task is to explain the gospel ; its first and last lesson is to forgive."

Lucilla's feelings were worked up beyond her powers of self-restraint, and she retorted with a bitter laugh which had been familiar to her in her pagan days, though forgotten since then.

"*You* have never known what it is to suffer."

Laurentius's brow grew flushed ; practised as he was in Christian gentleness, he could ill brook scorn, and the girl's sarcasm touched him to the quick : he answered gravely : "Lucilla, I have spoken to you but at rare intervals, and a long time may elapse ere I meet you again.* I think it time to tell you what I have as yet revealed to no one, not even to you, dear mother ; forgive my apparent want of confidence. I know that a bitter martyrdom will be mine ; God prepared for me a crown which His powerful grace alone can help me to obtain. In order to deserve it there is one condition I must fulfil ; the prayer which my Redeemer uttered on the Cross is daily on my lips : 'Lord Jesus, forgive my persecutors, for they know not what they do!'"

"But does not your heart burn within you, Laurentius?" asked Lucilla.

"It does; but to that ardour there is mingled the thirst for suffering."

"Alas, alas! then I am not yet a thorough Christian."

Laurentius turned to his mother for an answer which he felt would be more acceptable from her lips.

"You must desire it earnestly, Lucilla," interposed Siona; "turn your strong will towards God, and he will mould it, and you will feel no longer the same person."

She bowed her head submissively. "I shall follow your advice," she said; "I shall try to do so, at least."

"Brave girl! Now I can tell you without fear that Olympius and his wife Exuperia have come here to seek you."

"What! have they come to torture me too?"

"Lucilla, are you not under my mother's roof? Does not hospitality oblige us to shelter you at any cost, even if the laws of friendship did not? Do not fear; the spirit that has led those guilty ones hither is one of repentance and of prayer."

"But what do they know about me?"

"When Olympius, struck by Sempronius' wonderful courage, told his wife Exuperia all that had passed, he was not convinced himself, for the love of riches takes strange possession of a man's heart, and blinds him so as not to see what is the path of duty, but she, with the quick instinct of a noble nature, understood at once they had to deal with one who belonged to a superior

power, and she exclaimed, ‘ If the God of the Christians be so great, let us leave the gods who cannot help either us or themselves ; let us seek Him Who restored to sight the daughter of the tribune Nemesion ’. The thought of you, Lucilla, had, it appears, ever lain next her heart, and no one had rejoiced so heartily in your cure as she did. Thus she prevailed on her husband, and they went together to the room where Sempronius had been left since he was taken off the rack. She changed his bandages, poured a soothing ointment on his wounds, and after thus making use of her woman’s skill, she knelt down before him with her husband, and they confessed they believed in his God Who was called Christ. They asked him whether they might be instructed in the Christian religion ; he answered, ‘ Do penance and repent, then all you wish will be granted to you ’.

“ They consulted together as to what act they could perform in proof of their sincerity. The wounds of Sempronius pleaded for them before God, and Olympius felt that as one idol had fallen to dust in the martyr’s presence, so must none other remain in that house where he lay suffering. He left the room, and returned in a few minutes with a rich cabinet where he kept his household gods, broke them all up, and left their golden fragments on the floor, for the Christian poor, as he told Sempronius. God, Who never leaves anything unrewarded, sent His Voice through that house, and it was heard as if coming from on high, and it said, ‘ My Spirit shall rest on thee ’. And forthwith both husband

and wife expressed an earnest desire to seek you, and implore your forgiveness."

Lucilla was weeping ; all her vehemence had passed away. "Let me see them," she said, "before I go to my father."

"I left Exuperia with Flora, who is giving her her first instruction for baptism, for a persecution is near at hand, and they must be speedily received into the Church. I am going myself to fulfil the same duty towards Olympius, and I think it is better to let my mother fix the day she thinks suitable for your interview with these new Catechumens. You are not equal to it at present."

"As you judge best, dear friends. Thank you for all you have told me, and forgive me for displaying so unchristian a spirit."

"Do not say that ; this has been a day of intense misery to you. May it be the means of drawing you nearer to the goal."

So saying, he saluted his mother respectfully, and withdrew.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT was evening, and the doors of the Imperial palace on the Palatine, closed all day to exclude the heat, were now open to admit the coolness of the night air. The moon had risen, and shone brightly on those portals, plated in bronze, whose golden rings seemed more fit to meet the hand of the suppliant who might seek the refuge of that threshold, sacred as the sanctuary of a temple, than to invite the passer-by to knock and obtain admittance to Cæsar's majesty. Indeed, this threshold was guarded with less jealousy than any other in Rome; the term *Januæ pessulum obdere* * was hardly known by the *janitor*, and often the Emperor himself, with a simplicity which was perhaps only assumed to court popularity, might be seen leaning against the *antepagmenta*, inlaid with tortoise-shell, looking out on the world beyond, as if wearied with the solemnity of imperial pomp. Marble steps led up to the *foris* as to a temple, and the steps were of an uneven number, as was also the case in places of worship, lest he who ascended should be so unfortunate as to tread the *limen* (threshold) with the left foot. There were no guards on duty, and the silver dog, who, on this sump-

* *Obdere* (put across, or bar), *pessulum* (the bolt), *januæ* (of the door).

tuous threshold, represented the living dog of more modest dwellings, seemed scarce more quiet or unassuming than the imperial master, who silently watched by his side the rising of the moon.

Such solitude, however, could only be voluntary on the part of the ruler of the world, and he had purposely created it around himself, in order that his pursuits might be more private. About an hour elapsed, and he saw, glittering in the moonbeams, the white vestments of those he awaited. They were the priests of the *Dea Linigera*, and he forthwith admitted them to the palace. The religion of the Roman empire at that time presented a strange variety. Isis had once had her votaries among the people of Rome, and her most important temple stood in the Campus Martius, whence her name, Isis Campensis. At all times her priests and servants had been known by their linen garments, and those initiated in her mysteries wore, in the public processions, masks representing the heads of dogs. The works of art recorded her features. Her worship was introduced into Rome for the first time under the dictator Scylla. At a later period, her statue was removed from the Capitol, by an order of the senate; but the people resisted the decree, and her worship was restored, but her sanctuaries were not allowed within the *pomœrium* (a space round the walls of the city). Care for public morality excluded a divinity whose feasts were scenes of orgies, but, at the same time, the people were so partial to foreign gods, that government often authorised the erection of new temples to court popularity; thus

Isis continued to have sanctuaries outside the city. Her priests, learned in Oriental lore, had imbibed, from intercourse with the Persians, the doctrines of Zoroaster and studied his books ; and, although differing widely from the magi, they sheltered and patronised them. Thus, under cover of the old well-known Egyptian divinities, the new paganism, introduced by the Persians, learned by Valerian during his long stay in the East, and much loved by him, was imported, and more particularly practised in the precincts of the court. A new crime to be counted to Rome, as if the measure of her iniquities were not already full !

The Emperor greeted the magi as brethren, and admitted them to the private *ara* set apart for their rites in a secret room of the palace. . . . Night came on, that darkness alike favourable to sin and to prayer ; the moon shone on the fire-worshippers going to their impious rites, and on the Christians wending their way, at the same hour, to the Catacombs. 1

Let us leave the latter and turn to the pagan function, which began with a low, wailing chant ; the votaries then turned to the east, and prayed to the invisible Sun. There was a strange amalgamation in those benighted minds of a First Great Cause, which had been revealed to their fathers, of a Good Principle that ruled the world ; to which was opposed, yet subject, a mighty Evil One. Their creed came from a land where the Great Star had arisen to reveal a God Whom their ancestors would not adore ; around their country had flowed those four blessed streams, boundaries of the first

Paradise, that handiwork of God ; some relics of truth were mingled with their errors, and it was precisely for this that they were more dangerous.

After having performed their act of adoration, they lit their mystic fire ; but it went out. One of them knelt before a *sistrum*, an instrument composed of a narrow plate, curved like a sword-belt, through which passed four rods ; three were of silver, and, being three times shaken together, produced a rude harmony. Being four in number, their shaking within the circular apsis represented the agitation of the four elements within the compass of the world, by which all things were continually destroyed and reproduced. A cat, emblem of the moon, surmounted the instrument. While each priest in turn played the *sistrum*, the fire was lit a second and a third time, but was as rapidly extinguished. The Emperor, assisting at the sacrifice, looked on in wonder and dismay.

“ Cæsar,” explained the head magus, “ it is in vain for us to proceed with the incantations ; our god is irritated. There are in this empire you reign over some persons who pray for his annihilation and yours ; he will not be appeased until the Christians perish.”

“ But my decree has gone forth.”

“ And is not observed.”

“ I have ordered the judges to be lenient,—to exterminate the Christians were to destroy half my Empire ; in war they have proved my best soldiers, in peace my most faithful subjects.”

“ You are labouring under a delusion, noble Cæsar ;

they would destroy you, and put the Head of their religion at the head of the state."

"The Head of their religion was put to an ignominious death long ago."

"He never dies! it was but the earthly part of Him that expired; He lives and is their God! There is one man on earth who represents Him, who is endowed with His spirit, who rules the Christians, and in whom they believe—they call him Father; it is he that must fall, a sacrifice to our offended gods."

And thus Truth spoke by the mouth of the false worshipper, even as once before it had been uttered by Caiphas, the High Priest.

"Say you so? What, then, is his name, that he may be found?"

"Bid thy soldiers seek for Pope Stephen; and if others declare themselves to be he, in order to save him, let them all be taken prisoners."

Valerian still hesitated; he went into the inner apartments and sought for Gallienus, his colleague in the empire. Statuary has preserved to us busts of this Emperor. His features denote that age when manhood has just set in, and conferred that roundness of form which constitutes beauty. There is a harmony in the low forehead too, not alien to goodness, but it is an expression which the pinched lips dispel, and the smile they wear denotes a latent cruelty, which would relish the sight of suffering. They differed strangely these two, the hoary-headed father and the son in the prime of life; they seemed hardly to have come of one stock, but to

have been joined in a great destiny. Was it for weal or for woe? The son rose respectfully to receive his father's orders, but hearkened to none of the hesitations of the scrupulous old man.

"The empire must be defended, father, against its enemies," was the sole and invincible argument he could bring forward.

"Do you think so, my son? I am old, and have lost much energy. I have not the heart to punish innocent men. Gallienus, you know their innocence as well as I do; and have we not seen, of late years, that all who steep their hands in blood come to an untimely end?"

The young man laughed: "You consort too much with soothsayers, my father; you speak wisely, but it will be still wiser to save the empire."

Gallienus had been sitting when his father entered at a table where *tabulae*, the official documents of those days, were being sorted. He reached one called a diptych, from its folding in two, one part being in ivory, the other of citron wood, and the inside of both was covered with wax; they were fastened with wires answering the purpose of hinges, and opened and shut like our books; between them was a raised margin to prevent the wax of one tablet rubbing against that of another. Gallienus took his *stylus* and wrote. "See, father," said he, "my signature is affixed to this edict, and I have left a space for you to add your name above mine; do so, and thank the gods I am more careful of your rights than yourself."

Valerian took the proffered *stylus*; but after reading the freshly written edict, he turned the instrument to its

blunt point, which was generally used to efface, whence the expression *Vertere stylum*. Gallienus saw the movement, and, seizing his parent's hand, "Sign!" he cried imperiously.

"And if their God," interposed the Emperor solemnly, "revenge on me their innocent blood."

"Sign!" repeated the young man; "the greatest god in Rome is a Roman Emperor."

Thus compelled, Valerian obeyed, and Gallienus, fearful of a retractation, pierced the edges with a pointed *stylus*, passed through the holes a triple thread, on which he fixed a seal. The edict against the Christians had become an imperial mandate. . . .

Didst thou remember that hour in later years, Valerian? didst thou see in thy fearful doom a punishment inflicted by that God of the Christians, Whom thou hadst instinctively known and feared?

A few days later Valerian stood again at his household hearth, called upon to administer justice towards one whom his own laws had arrested. He would not judge him in the Forum, but ordered him to be brought to the palace; and there, where he had worshipped with the magi but a few nights ago, he stood now face to face with the minister of the true God. Both were aged, both had served their country nobly, each in his different calling; both were accustomed to command, and Stephen quailed not before his earthly master.

"It is thou," began Valerian, "who overthrowest the republic, persuading men to renounce the service of the gods."

“ I overthrow not the republic,” replied Stephen, “ but I do exhort people to throw down idols, to renounce the demon who is worshipped in their name, and to recognise the true God.”

“ Thou art courageous, old man, and fearest not to speak to me who am mightier than thou art.”

“ I serve One Whom I obey at the peril of my life.”

“ Verily ! thou speakest as a soldier.”

“ I have been one, but Rome needs other services than those of the shield and sword ; I would have defended my country if she had let me, not from mortal enemies, but from false gods.”

“ Stephen, thou hast that spirit which strikes home to a soldier’s heart, and I would fain let thee go free, but I cannot ; the edict has gone forth ! ”

“ And thou wilt repent of having signed that edict, Cæsar, when, fallen from where thou art now, thou rememberest the Christians thou didst persecute would have been thy best friends.”

“ I have not the heart to condemn thee ; go to another judge.”

The doors which had closed upon Stephen when admitted to the Emperor’s private presence now opened again ; he found himself in the midst of the lictors who had first escorted him ; they took him to the temple of Mars. Many people assembled to see him pass, for it was the hour at which the Forum was most frequented. The old man heeded them not, but prayed in spirit that God might make use of his feebleness to the glory of His Name, and work a portent to speak to the senses

of this people ; and as he approached the temple, sacred to the god of war he too had served and worshipped in his pagan days, he felt that a mighty power, an extraordinary measure of grace was being imparted to him, that by one act he could efface all the deeds of his past life, and bring about the salvation of hundreds. He raised his venerable hands which had blessed many of his brethren ere they entered into glory, he looked up, and with a loud voice which, wonderfully strong in one so aged, seemed to prove that a new spirit spoke within him ; “ Oh God ! ” he cried, “ Thou Who didst destroy Babylon and many guilty cities on account of their iniquities, destroy this place where the devil brings about the ruin of deluded souls by means of superstition ”.

At the sound of that venerable voice, the sky which had been serene till then grew suddenly cloudy, and thunder was heard rolling in the distance. In a few seconds the peals became more distinct, the storm was drawing nearer and nearer, darkness seemed to be closing in, relieved by vivid flashes of lightning, the electric fluid glanced hither and thither like a minister of heavenly vengeance. Suddenly a crash was heard, the roof of the temple had fallen in—the walls were yet partly standing ; a wild cry of horror arose from the spectators as they scanned their ranks, to see who had been buried beneath the ruins and who had survived.

A lower yet more piercing wail was heard to issue from those crumbling stones, black with heaven’s fire, white with clouds of mortar, red and trickling with human

gore. Where were the soldiers? Gone! Where their prisoner, the priest of God? Erect, unscathed, alone! Stephen walked through the opening ranks of the terrified crowd, and went to seek a refuge, not in the Catacomb where he had been already taken prisoner, but, after following the Appian road for about a mile and a half, he turned to the left. There was a path here leading to another public road, and thence to the Catacombs of Lucina, where the Pontiff meant to take up his abode; but, as he passed through a field, the crumbling of the soil under his feet reminded him he was near the caves whence sand had been extracted. He tried to find the path leading to one, already well known to the reader, but the entrance had been concealed with more than ordinary caution, as it was feared every place frequented by Christians might be searched. Stephen got entangled in a wild copse where he could see nothing but heaps of stones covered with brambles. Giving up all hope of discovering the object of his search, he began to sing fragments of a Christian hymn in a low voice. At first he got no response but the wind rustling mournfully through the trees; then came the rattling of bricks which had been heaped over felled trees, and through the interstices appeared two little faces.

"Holy Father," they cried, "it is our Holy Father!" Another moment and they were kneeling before him, kissing his feet.

"Where are my children?" he asked.

"Our parents are here," they replied, "quite safe; we are all praying for you, both here and in the Catacombs."

"Then you have been heard, for He that is mighty has done great things in me, and holy is His Name."

"Will you come in, Holy Father?" asked Maia.

The Pontiff stroked her forehead, pleased at the childish, modest expression of her countenance.

"And where would you lead me, little maiden? Verily, you seem to have sprung out of a rat-hole. I am an old man and not so agile as you."

Maia drew away her little brother, who was looking up at the Pope in mute reverence and wonder. "Come, come, Eone, you must help me to make the opening larger, or let us call out to those down below; that will be more respectful towards his Holiness than to ask him to descend."

So saying, both children stooped over the orifice, shouting to those within the name of the new-comer, and forthwith the temporary barrier was pushed aside, and from that cave issued, one after the other, Paulina, Adrias, and Hippolytus; they cast themselves on their knees before the representative of Christ on earth.

"Holy Father!" they cried, "we thought you were in the hands of your persecutors, and hardly knew in what sense to pray for you, whether for one living or dead."

"My life has been prolonged for a little while, my children, until the work be accomplished which our Heavenly Father wills me to do. Yet a few days, and my lot will be cast with those who mourn no more. Choice portion of my flock, I feel that we shall not meet again, therefore I turned aside from my journey to impart to

you my last benediction, even as Christ did to His Apostles before He left this earth."

So saying, the Pope blessed them, solemnly, laying his hands on the head of each, and making on their foreheads a little sign of the cross :

"It is probable," he continued, "that God calls each one of you to the crown of martyrdom. When I meet you before His judgment seat, I shall recognise you as those I have signed in my Lord's name, and I hope to see you sprinkled with the Blood of the Lamb."

The two children had been kneeling by Paulina while the Pontiff was speaking. When he had done, she raised her tearful eyes to look at him, asking in a hushed voice : "All?"

"Poor mother's heart!" exclaimed Stephen compassionately, "thou wouldst have these spared, yet, tell me, daughter, were Heaven given to thee without thy children—?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, "God is too good for that!"

"Thou believest in His generosity, but has He not a right to thine? Wilt thou make any reserve with Him Who has given thee all? May He not take from thee what He wills? And yet He leaves thee the merit of offering freely."

She could not answer, sobs choked her utterance.

"There was *one* Mother to whom it was foretold that a sword should pierce her soul, and she lived all her life through with that unclosed wound, because it was the will of her Divine Son; and when He expired in the

midst of torments, she *stood* by His side. Daughter, thou dost understand me ? ”

She bowed her head submissively, clasped her hands, which till then she had pressed on her little ones, and said in a low but firm voice : “ I am ready ! ”

“ Then, may thy sufferings be abridged and a special grace visit thee, on the part of Him Who liveth for ever, Great, Holy and True ! ”

He turned away to proceed on his journey, but they clung to him.

“ Holy Father, do not leave us thus, do not go forth alone.”

“ Leave me, dear children, to the care of God. Even as a little while ago I lifted my feeble hands to Him in prayer, and fire from Heaven struck the pagan temple to which they had led me, even so will the Lord watch over his poor old servant, until the last hour come ! ”

Thus he left them, and they remained praying until they could see him no more.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE Catacombs ! Who among modern pilgrims to the Eternal City has not visited these dormitories of the Christians that went to sleep in the Lord ? If the very atmosphere of our churches be impregnated with a mysterious holiness, sensible sometimes even to the unbeliever, if, "through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault," the genius of Catholicism has stamped its indelible seal, because those mute stones serve to shelter the Holy of Holies ; if it be so, then the Catacombs, despoiled in our days of their glorious dead, are yet to the Catholic heart the scene of a great battle-field, where the soldiers of Christ have left the print of their footsteps whereby they can be recognised. Brave hearts, that never gave up the bloody combat till they conquered, and earned for themselves the warrior's meed—a bed of glory on the field of victory.

Sleep peacefully, brethren, while the banners of the King you fought for wave over your resting-place. Sleep, but watch still, like the sentinel at his post, for your work is not yet completed ! The battle must be fought over again by those who have come after you ; and from your mute sepulchres you can teach us still the strategy and art of warfare by which you conquered.

The central gallery, which seems to be even now the principal artery of the Catacombs, was lit with oil lamps on either side, so as to avoid any confusion in the concourse of many persons in those subterraneous vaults. Lights were also placed at those central points whence passages branched off, leading to the separate chapels allotted to the male and female members of the congregation. This, as we have previously remarked, was a point of discipline most strictly observed in those days. At the entrance to the women's side stood the deaconesses, those helpers in the service of the Church, instituted perhaps in memory of the holy women who ministered to our Saviour and followed Him to His burial. These received the offerings of pious persons as they entered, succoured those who were poor, and prepared all that was necessary for the exterior worship and decorum of the altar. Siona had been raised to the honour of serving the Church in this capacity, Flora helped her, and Lucilla was under instructions aspiring to the same dignity. She was comparatively free, as her father, Nemesion, was preparing for the priesthood; his zeal and spirit of self-sacrifice compensated for his advanced years, and he had already received the order of deacon.

This evening there was a noticeable perturbation in the ranks of the faithful; all seemed to be pressing forward eagerly, with an expression of joyful expectation on their faces.

"Have you seen him yet, Flora?" asked her mother, as they portioned out together the bread for the *agapæ*;

not by any means the same sort of person who holds this office in the Society of Friends. or Independent churches

“would you like to speak to him in private and be blessed by him?”

“There are so many who would be desirous of that honour, mother, that I dare not express my humble wish.”

“But I am jealous of his blessing for you, daughter: there is a burning eloquence in his words, the gift of the Holy Spirit imparted to him with greater plenitude before he leave us. We shall not possess him long: he said to me himself, as he bid me prepare everything to make this a place of refuge during the expected persecution: ‘My time with you will be but short!’”

“Probably he has received a message from on high!”

They ceased speaking, for the Holy Pontiff, the object of their discourse, was just then passing on to the women’s chapel to give to them a short exhortation. He was accompanied by two deacons, who remained outside the door, hewn out of the wall, and he entered alone.

Leaning against the tomb of another Pope, over whose sarcophagus an arch had been raised, Pope Stephen lifted his hands, still bruised with traces of the chains he had worn a few days ago for his Lord, and, in accents of grateful praise, he told his people how he had escaped from the ruins of that temple which it had pleased God to destroy. He spoke to them of the beauty of long-suffering, as meritorious in some cases as the very act of martyrdom; for the one sometimes prepared a soul for the other, and the tears of contrition water the palm which many of them were aspiring to cull in the choice

garden of God's Saints. Thus, great graces are given to those who deserve them, the sign of victory would be laid on the graves of such as had won it, but a life of good works would prove the best preparation for a martyr's death.

"For some it may be near at hand, for others far off," he concluded ; "let us then be prepared, my brethren, not only by summoning up that natural courage inherent to our country's sons, and inscribed on our pagan fathers' tombstones as a great virtue. We, Christians, aspire to another glory—it must be said of us that we died for our God, and our end must be like to His ! Like Him, our dying prayer ought to be to implore pardon for those who have wronged us. Are we all ready to do this, my children ? are we sure of our own hearts ? And who am I, O God, who thus address my flock ? Has my speech towards my judges been ever temperate and charitable ? have I loved them as Christ loved me ?"

He paused, and covered his face with his hands ; an interval of silence ensued, during which the suppressed weeping of the audience was distinctly audible ; then he, the Father, the Support of them all, fell on his knees, and, with uplifted hands : "Lamb of God," he cried, "Thou Who takest away the sins of the world, pardon me, whose life is so unworthy of the high station Thou hast assigned to me ; pardon me, if I have scandalised any of these little ones, and let the death I am willing to suffer expiate the wrong I have done !"

He looked so majestic in this act of self-humiliation, that all had fallen on their knees for very awe ; the

children crept round him, kissing his vestments. The general emotion spread even to those who stood without the chapel ; for the men, prevented by rule from entering, had nevertheless drawn near enough to hear the accents of that beloved voice. All were powerfully moved, and felt that there was in very deed, in that hour especially, but one heart among them all.

At this moment a strange noise of rough voices broke in upon the silence of the hallowed spot. All felt danger was near, and the men put their hands to their belts, instinctively seeking for the daggers they habitually wore, but which they had all laid aside previous to being admitted at the Table of the Lord ; the women crouched down, trembling. Pope Stephen stepped forward with a solemn pace, and, waving his hand : "Flee," he cried, "my children, in silence and order, through the new passage which leads to the last made Catacomb. I shall guard your escape, and fulfil my trust. I was bred a Roman soldier, and shall die at my post."

Laurentius clung to his garments : "Father, I cannot—I will not leave thee."

"I command thee to flee, my son ; the soldiers from whom I escaped have tracked me here. *My* hour has come, but *thine* not yet ; thou must live for thy mother. Go !"

Another and older deacon placed himself on the other side of the Pope : "Where will you await the intruders, Holy Father ?" he asked.

"You here, Nemesion ?"

“ Yes, in life and in death, I leave you no more.”

“ Then, let us to my papal chair ; on that throne where I was anointed it is meet that I should give up my rights with my life.”

The venerable Pontiff went on his way through the intricate passages as solemnly as if he were leading a procession. The most courageous of his flock followed him ; all the women and most of the men had already escaped. Nemesion still held up the papal robes, in which Stephen had vested for the Sacrifice. Intent on his duty, he never turned back ; nor did he perceive a youthful figure, ill defined in the gloom, which had placed itself behind him when he declared his intention of staying near the Pope. It spoke to no one ; it followed in the shadow of Nemesion’s footsteps.

Stephen reached his stone chair, that seat still preserved in the church of Santo Stefano, which each succeeding Pope might revere as the throne of his spiritual sovereignty, were it not that the Prince of the Apostles has left another humbler chair, known in the Vatican Basilica as the Cathedra Petri.

The silence which had fallen on that faithful group was uninterrupted ; for a little while they began to wonder whether they had been mistaken in their previous alarm, or whether the danger was over. . . . But hark ! the vaults echoed with a sound which spoke for itself. It was the heavy tramp of soldiery, and the clank of their military armour. . . . They were at hand. . . .

Many of those brave Christians had borne arms for

their country, and courted death on the battle-field, when danger is to the soldier but a stimulus to daring deeds, where, intoxicated by the vision of glory, he feels already the laurels of victory encircling his fevered brow, sees the image of his future greatness reflected as if in a mirage of blood. . . . Men often live a lifetime in a few hours. But these had turned their hearts away from hopes of earth to hopes of Heaven, and entered upon the narrow path of Christian lowliness and perfection; they knew that a martyr's death might close their blameless life, and had learned to prepare for it. But even so, they had expected to die in the face of Heaven, with God's bright sun shining down on their torments, under the eyes of a savage multitude, whose cruelty would but whet their courage, while, here and there, a brother's face might be seen in the crowd, or a voice at a distance would soothe the victim with a Christian word. Oh, how different from death in the Coliseum was this waiting in the dark for an unseen enemy whose deadly gripe would prove stealthy and sure! What a contrast these sacred vaults would soon present, with the peaceful concourse of an hour ago, when nothing was heard but the harmonious chant of united prayer! And still Stephen sat, calm and dignified, robed in full pontificals on the Papal chair. Nemesis and twelve priests surrounded him; outside the circle stood those few remaining brethren who would not leave their father.

Soon they heard rough voices enquiring, "Where is Stephen? where is he that overthrows the gods of the Empire?"

The flickering lamp which burned before the altar directed their steps, for most of them had extinguished their torches, which, as they found, instead of guiding them, only warned the Christians of their approach. One of the soldiers had groped on a little way by himself, and, returning to his comrades, whispered: "Come with me, I have found them". They followed him tumultuously, but hardly had they touched the consecrated soil of the Pontiff's chapel than a change came over them; they grew silent, reversed their arms, and stood still. Thus had barbarians entered Rome in times of yore, violated her sanctuaries, paced her deserted streets, and wondered that they met with no opposition; but when they reached the Capitol, whence so many wise laws had emanated, where the sun of Rome's glory had arisen, never more to set, they found a few old men guarding the heart of the republic, and at the sight of that decrepit majesty they had grown awe-stricken and dumb, wondering whether the senate of Rome were not an assembly of gods. Did the memory of that fact recur to Valerian's soldiers as they paused before delivering their message? It was Stephen himself who broke the silence that had fallen upon them. "Whether you come as friends or as foes," said he, "receive our greeting in the name of the Lord."

The sweet words penetrated even to their soldiers' soul, and they were visibly moved, when their centurion, fearing lest they should betray their trust, and knowing that his own rise or fall depended on this expedition, roused all the roughness of his nature to

stem the tide of gentleness which would fain have the mastery.

"Do not try to dissuade us from our duty," he said; "we come to seek him who turns the people away from our gods. You are guilty of this crime, and must suffer for it."

"Methinks," observed Stephen, "it is hardly necessary to seek the shelter of darkness to arraign me for what I have done in open daylight. As to the power I exercise over your false divinities, let Mars and his ruined temple testify."

"You are bold," replied the soldier, "but our master is powerful enough to conquer you."

"I obey a Master Who is greater than Cæsar."

"Cease your impious boasting."

"I await your orders. Am I to follow you into prison? I am ready!"

"We too are all ready with him," added Nemesion, in a firm voice.

"All!" repeated the rest, "all to a man!"

"What would you do in prison, Stephen," exclaimed the centurion, "but corrupt your gaolers, disseminate false doctrines, destroy our gods, and make walls crumble at your word? No! there has been enough of this! Our orders are peremptory. You must die here, like a dangerous animal tracked to its den."

The old man stood up with quivering lip, and his eye flashed indignation for a moment. He knew his rights as a Roman citizen, and could, even then, throw them in the teeth of his persecutors. But was he not a Christian

too ? The robes he wore were the symbol of the high dignity conferred upon him by the Church. Was it not more glorious to die for her than to defend her ?

"Another will plead my cause," he said, "One Who knows the secrets of all hearts. He appointed me guardian to His flock, and He has taught by His example that the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep. Be it so !"

Gently, but with a gesture of authority, he motioned away from either side of him his faithful followers, who sought in vain to shield him, and, holding out his hands to the soldiers : "Take me," he said, "to prison or to death ; only spare these, my children !"

Just as the last word was uttered, the lictors unsheathed their *fusces* and closed round Stephen, fastening him to his seat ; then a ponderous sword was seen to swing in front of him, backwards and forwards, as it was poised in the air ; in another moment it had struck against the wall and flashed fire in the contact. The body of Stephen fell heavily to the ground, his head not completely severed from the trunk, while the warm life blood spouted upwards with a hissing sound, like water from a hot spring. A cry of horror arose from the Christians ; but, above the voices of all those men was heard a female shriek, so piercing, that the soldiers recoiled, thinking it to proceed from an angry spirit, and the vaulted passages re-echoed it again and again, as it sounded mournful changes, like a chime ringing for the dead.

There, where men alone had stood, surrounding the

Pontiff, a girl was now kneeling over his mortal remains besmeared with blood. She held her veil over the lifeless trunk till it was steeped in gore, then, raising her reeking hands aloft, she stood like a prophetess hurling back on the assassins the blood which they had spilt: "Go, myrmidons of Cæsar, leave this soil profaned by your unholy presence, tell him he has been obeyed—tell him the blood of an aged, defenceless man cries for vengeance to the Lord!"

"Lucilla!" exclaimed the bystanders; "how came she here?"

"My child," interposed Nemesion, gravely, "this is not thy place."

"Forgive me, father, I am irresistibly moved by a spirit which prompts me to speak. And you that wear the garb of soldiers, and are but vile cowards at heart, touch me not till I have done. Tell him who sent you, who is little better than yourselves, tell him that the hour of his punishment will come, for he too will meet with one who will make him his victim; and, when prostrate at the feet of a haughty captor, even as that dead body lies before you now, he will remember this dark deed, long for forgiveness, but seek for it in vain, and this blood will cling to him for evermore!"

She stopped, overpowered by her own vehemence, and went to lean against the wall behind the choir. When there a friendly arm supported her, and she heard the voice of Claudius whispering: "Be calm and silent, or you will injure both your father and yourself; close your eyes and feign unconsciousness, so that I may bear

you away in safety". She obeyed, but she heard the soldiers utter a name which made her start again, and with great difficulty she concealed her emotion.

"Only part of our business is despatched; our orders lead us to apprehend one Nemesion, a tribune; is he here?"

No one would answer, and he might have escaped had he not denounced himself.

"A tribune knows the laws of Rome require obedience. I am ready! wait but till I have divested myself of these sacred robes"—and taking off his dalmatic, he knelt beside the martyr's corpse, signed himself with that yet warm blood, then, rising again, "Let us go!" he said; and he held out his hands to be manacled. While this operation was being done, he addressed the faithful Claudius, saying, "I commend to you my poor child; tell your young mistress I leave her to her care. Thank Heaven, she has fainted, the pain of parting will be spared her." He bent over her and imprinted a kiss on her forehead, then tore himself away, to part from her, as he thought, for ever!

Scarcely, however, was he out on the road, walking in the midst of soldiers with a firm, martial tread, looking more like their chief than their captive, than he felt some one at his side; he turned round, and a clinging arm drew tightly round his. The soldiers looked on in astonishment, but not one dared lay a hand on the tribune's daughter, who had but a few minutes ago addressed them with such authoritative words; her blood-stained garments clung round her like a shroud, and she looked weird and ghastly, like one just escaped from the

tomb. Nemesion understood the mute request of her loving eyes, so lately endowed with sight, but concentrating in their expression all the love of a lifetime. Could he send her away from him, his heart's treasure, whose very presence made him braver to face death? could he loosen the hold she had of him when her pale lips murmured: "Wherever thou didst live, I lived; wherever thou goest, I will go, and not even death shall part me from thee"?

Could he refuse her? He folded her to his breast, offering her a noble sacrifice to his God. The soldiers looked on; their chief was perplexed what course to pursue, but Lucilla solved the question with calm dignity: "I am a Christian," she exclaimed; "let me share my father's honoured chains!" Her request was complied with, and they walked on side by side.

On, on, in the open night air, while the moon shone on the grassy fields, conferring on them a pure, bright light, as if God Himself were looking down on His creation. It was the fresh country air, untainted by the sinfulness of town life, but fragrant with the unalloyed sweetness of wild flowers; the night breeze danced in the leaves that waved so gently, as if they too were gifted with life and motion, and were inhaling the invigorating dew. On they went through these pleasant scenes, father and child, to their doom, happy in being united on their way to death, as they had been all through life. On through the desolate Campagna, along the Appian road, the way of the tombs. What matter that lictors walked before them, and others trod

behind them, enclosing them in a glittering phalanx ? The thoughts of the captives soared far beyond. Of the dreadful catastrophe they had witnessed neither dared speak to the other ; it was stamped on the soul of each like a fiery brand which sears for ever the heart it has fallen upon.

Along the Appian road—but why this halt ? Why do the soldiers strike into the field ? Why do they take that path, once worn by the feet of the sand diggers, but long since grass-grown, and now strewn with sand and pebbles, nay, seemingly choked with briars ? Lucilla clung still closer to her father, but feared to look up at him, for she felt his pulse quicken, and knew he shared her fear. Alas ! she understood it all ! They were going to Hippolytus' cave, and it was evident the brethren had been betrayed. The traitor was a renegade Christian, one who even now was disguised among the soldiers ; he it was who had led them to the Catacombs, and who pointed out now the poor dwelling of the hermit of the roadside. In a few moments the stones concealing the entrance were removed, and the centurion entered with a few of his followers, leaving the rest to guard the prisoners.

That short interval appeared very long to Nemesion and Lucilla. They clasped their fettered hands, praying that their brethren might be spared ; but God had chosen them already, and that night the Church was to count more than one name in the annals of her martyrs. The men returned, escorting Adrias and Paulina, who were bound together. Hippolytus followed ; in his

chained arms they had placed the sleeping Eone ; little Maia tripped on by herself, proudly shaking the iron rings generally used as thumb-screws for purposes of torture, but serving as manacles for her baby wrists. And there, in that bright moonlight, the captives looked one at another in surprise, yet nowise dismayed. They wondered at meeting thus, but at the same time they rejoiced, and Hippolytus raised his voice in thanksgiving to God for permitting them to perform together this last journey which was to lead them to the very foot of His throne.

But Paulina looked at her little ones and wept. Was it for this they had grown up under her eyes, so lovely and so winning, that the very soldiers as they handled them seemed moved? . . . she felt God was requiring much, very much from her . . . could she bear it to the end ? . . .

Was the interior struggle so apparent, or was it Nemesion's kind nature that spoke within him ? He turned to the soldiers : " A tribune myself," he said, " I have given you the example of obedience to the laws, and now, in your turn, hearken to me: it is unseemly to load weak women with chains, for the road is a long one, and they may sink under the heavy weight. There is a far stronger bond which chains us all to our duty ; relieve the ladies, and I answer for the safety of the prisoners ! "

Nemesion's request was immediately complied with ; the soldiers struck off the irons from all the Christians.

Paulina embraced her children ; Lucilla took Maia's

little hand and walked by the side of her friend, whose emotion went to her heart.

"You are disturbed, Paulina; I would fain comfort you," and she recounted to her all that had taken place that evening, their capture, and the murder of Stephen.

The counterpoise was effectual: horror at the fate of their common Father called up all Paulina's better feelings.

"My God!" she exclaimed, "and I saw him so lately that I feel as if the blessing he gave me then was still imprinted here," and she put her hand to her forehead. "Is *he* indeed gone? he so holy and so true! Oh, who shall tend Christ's flock now?"

"Who, Paulina? I shall tell you. He Who told His disciples not to fear in the night when the shepherd would be struck. He Who told us that when we are led before the tribunals we are not to be mindful beforehand of what we shall answer, for in that hour He will inspire us what to say. He, in a word, Who, on a night like this, prayed for the space of three hours while He suffered the weakness of mortal agony, then went out strengthened to His doom. He met His Mother, and she followed Him step by step, nor faltered till she stood by Him as He expired. *Stabat Mater ejus*. And you too, Paulina, must *stand by* even while these dear ones are being immolated to God."

"Brave girl, you speak like Flora."

"I know nothing but what I have learned from her. Instructed by her, I have been taught to live; strengthened by her, I have already prepared to die."

“And I am very weak, but I shall pray even as the Man-God in the garden.”

“Teach your children to pray too,” replied Lucilla, “while I join my father, for our hours are numbered.”

And they went on to their prison, yet with joy ; to their doom, yet calmly ; and they bent over each other, as over a death-bed, exchanging their last farewells. And the moon shone down on that triumphal procession of captives, and rested on their calm brows, even as the ethereal light painters place round the heads of saints.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON the morning after the events related in the preceding chapter, Flora was more assiduously engaged than usual in the *textrinum*, where the female slaves called *quasillarie* worked at the loom. She was anxious that everything in the house should wear its usual well-regulated, peaceful aspect, lest the appearance of an unwonted relaxation from work or any exterior mark of sorrow should excite the suspicion that they were acquainted with the events of the preceding night, and consequently disclose the fact that the whole household was Christian. She trembled for her impetuous, high-minded brother. How grateful she felt to Claudius for having induced him to leave the Catacombs at the moment the alarm had been given she had sufficiently expressed in her tearful thanks to the old slave. But this thought was still uppermost; and as the little Helena, old enough to play by herself, now walked about, now sat on the floor, picking up the bits of wool that fell from the loom and twining them round her baby fingers, Flora would take her up in her arms, and exclaim as she kissed her, "Blessed child, thou little knowest that salvation entered this house with thy grandfather; can I ever love thee

enough?" And the child's grave smile seemed to the anxious Flora an answer full of comfort to her troubled heart, and she resumed the task she had set to herself as a necessary counterpoise to her over-worked mind.

Although weaving was with the Romans a trade in itself, carried on by a distinct class, yet Siona, faithful to the traditions of old, had preserved the loom, which in ancient times was considered a guarantee for the industry and virtue of the mistress of the house. She and her daughter often used it, either to instruct beginners or to finish off tastefully some piece of work which had been done by the *quasillarie*; for the art, originally introduced by the Greeks, had grown to much elegance and refinement in Rome. There were at present an unusual number of workwomen in Siona's *tex-trinum*, which she had opened as a place of refuge to many Christian women and maidens, who had hitherto devoted themselves exclusively to the service of the Church and the poor, and for whom it was advisable on the eve of a persecution to assume a more ostensible avocation. Among these was Concordia, Flora's old nurse, who, after having passed from the service of Siona to that of her friend Hippolyta, had finally obtained her liberty from her second masters soon after she became a Christian and devoted herself to God. It was a great pleasure to find herself once more under the roof of her old mistress, and, with the familiarity of former days, she asked Flora to stand with her at the loom. The warp was always upright, whence it was called *stamen*, and the web or cloth *vestis pendens*, be-

cause it hung from the beam (*jugum*). The process of annexing the leashes to the warp went by the name *ordiri telam*. It occupied two women at a time; one took each separate thread of the warp and handed it over to the other; she who received it passed it through the loop in proper order. Flora took the shuttle and decussated it by drawing forward the proper rod, then handed the *spatha* to her companion, the teeth of which were inserted between the threads of the warp, and thus made, by a forcible impulse, to drive the threads of the woof together. But this part of the work recalled painful reminiscences to Flora: *stamina* and *jugum* were the names given to the chords of a lyre, by comparison with a loom. That usual instrument, only known to the Romans as a Greek invention, was denominated a *plectrum*, not that the instrument used in striking it was at all like a comb, but because it was held in the right hand and inserted in the chords of the lyre.

And Flora thought of *that* lyre whose sounds had so often enlivened that home, of the dear one who had played it, and whose affection had been to her such a solace, poor Reparata! the best loved among so many young friends who had surrounded her in childhood! what a contrast to her present isolation!

“My dear young mistress,” observed Concordia, who saw the cloud gathering on Flora’s brow, and wished to dispel the gloom, “that little child that nestles quietly on the floor is so unlike what you were at her age: you would have bounded from one frame to the other, disturbing all the workwomen, and laughing with such

hearty glee that every one who saw you must needs laugh too."

"What a troublesome child I must have been!" said Flora, faintly smiling.

"You brought sunshine wherever you came," continued the fond nurse. "Oh, how often since then I have wished to be allowed to serve you! I think it must be something like a second motherhood, that fostering love we give to the child confided to our care, and which is so amply rewarded. But see, dear lady, look at the door; my lady, your mother, is beckoning to you."

The curtain, which hung over the door of the *textrinum* to preserve the looms from dust, was suddenly drawn aside, and Siona entered, pale, haggard, her manner evincing much perturbation; she seemed unconscious of all but the presence of her daughter, and, going up to her at once, put one hand on each of her shoulders, pressing down in her agitation the *fibula* which held the *stola*, till it marked the fair skin beneath, then whispered, "They are brought to trial".

Flora shuddered, but, retaining her self-possession: "Come out, mother, into the *aula*; there we shall be alone. Is it possible their trial is so soon?"

"Ay! the Emperor Valerian is about to leave Rome, and wishes to examine them himself before he leaves."

"Fit task for a Cæsar. But what takes him from Rome so suddenly?"

"The ally of Rome, Chosroes, King of Armenia, has been assassinated by the emissaries of Sapor, the new

King of Persia. The Empire cannot brook an insult offered to our faithful ally, and Valerian hastens to avenge him."

"Leaving behind him an edict which will cause the best blood of Rome to be poured forth like water. The Will of God be done!"

"Let us retire together to pray in our oratory, daughter."

"Suffer not Laurentius to go forth; he would hasten to the trial and betray himself."

"Fear not! I have gladly availed myself of the invitation of some experienced *fossores*, who came to ask him to join him in a good and holy work, which they assured me is completely secure from danger. They are well acquainted with the intricacies of the Catacombs, and they intend to proceed from a starting-point of which they alone have the secret, and branch off into the Cemetery of Lucina, where the body of our martyred Pope awaits the last rites. Dear boy, much as I love him, it is a relief to have him away, whereas with you, my heart would break if I did not tell you anything."

"Dearest mother," and she presented her forehead to those fond lips, which derived strength from the sympathising contact; "but how shall we know the fate of our beloved friends?" she enquired.

"Claudius has assumed a disguise, and is gone to witness the trial; meanwhile let us pass the time in prayer till he return."

Flora re-entered the *textrinum* to leave the direction of the work and the handmaidens to Concordia, then

followed her mother. That parent and child were linked by more than usual ties; they were united by an affection strengthened over a grave, by mutual esteem, by unlimited confidence. They were, moreover, the last of their house, the descendants of one on whom the Redeemer had looked with complacency; they had, as they often reminded each other, a destiny to fulfil.

Hour after hour passed heavily away. It was not till the afternoon that Claudius returned, and they gathered from his saddened looks that he had bad news to impart. He asked at once for Laurentius, but Siona informed him he would not be back till next day.

"Better so, my lady; I would not, in his hearing, repeat what I have seen. As to myself, it makes my old blood boil over."

"Are they then condemned?"

"All! and not only they, but when Adrias was brought forward, and declined his name, the judges remembered they had sent one to discover him, who had never appeared again; they enquired where was Maximus, who had been wont to sit in the tribunals, taking down depositions. The rumour circulated that perhaps he had become a Christian. They sent to seek for him, and found him in his house praying; and when they asked him whether the report about him were true, he answered: 'Yes, I was formerly blind, but I am now enlightened by Jesus Christ!' and forthwith they bound him and led him to confront the others. When, at the tribunal, he recognised Adrias, he flung himself at his feet: 'Oh, you,' he said, 'whom I was paid to

betray, whom I followed with that intention, and who, returning my perfidy with kindness, did first disclose to me the beauty of virtue, pardon me that I am the cause, though not immediately so, of bringing you to this. Pardon me, once more, my bad intentions, though I was prevented from executing them. I had wept and prayed so much that I hoped my sin was forgiven me ; but, alas ! for the fearful consequences of one wrong act ! Let those who witness my repentance profit by my sad experience !’

“Adrias gave him, before all present, the kiss of peace, and Maximus began, in a loud voice, to give praise to God. He spoke so long and so well that the populace hung on his words, and the soldiers around him were all attention, and the judge was well-nigh forgetting his business, when the sound of heralds’ trumpets announced the coming of the Cæsars. They took their seats and I scanned them narrowly. Valerian never looked at his victims, and Gallienus seemed to think it incumbent on him to assume the command, which he did, speaking with great severity.

“‘There are names on the list of proscription,’ he said, ‘which I do not see represented here ; where is Sempronius, who has been treacherously concealing the treasures of Nemesion ? where is the tribune Olympius ? and where Exuperia his wife ? They too have befriended the Christians, and, instead of torturing Sempronius, have honoured him.’

“And forthwith soldiers were sent to seek them in their dwelling, and along with them Sempronius, who

had thought himself safely concealed under their roof. He had not yet recovered from the effects of his torture, and was obliged to be supported by the soldiers, being as yet unable to walk. Gallienus addressed him first.

“‘Why do you not adore the gods that govern the republic?’ he asked.

“‘Christ governs us,’ was the straightforward answer. To Olympius whose turn came next, the Emperor said: ‘Your punishment shall be put off, because you adored the gods long and faithfully, and forced others to serve them.’

“‘I did!’ answered this Christian of a few days, replying with a firmness worthy of a veteran in the faith: ‘I did, and I mourn over my fault!’

“Gallienus turned pale at this reply, which evidently was too much for him, and turning to his father, said: ‘If these be not exterminated, others will join them, and this canker that is gnawing at the heart of the republic will spread. Cæsar, deign to order them to sacrifice to the gods, and threaten them with the ordinary punishments if they refuse.’

“‘I have signed the edict,’ was the sole reply of the elder Emperor.

“Gallienus ordered Paulina, Exuperia, Lucilla, and the children of Adrias to be taken back to prison while the men were being examined.

“Maximus raised his voice: ‘Let me, who went among them to betray them, suffer first,’ he cried.

“‘Justice where justice is due!’ replied the Cæsar,

‘let it be done according to your desire. Will you sacrifice?’

“‘No!’ answered the former scribe, ‘I am happy to die to expiate my fault. I believe in Christ alone!’

“‘When we arrived here,’ resumed the Emperor, ‘you were holding forth like an orator. You have talked enough in that strain!’

| “‘As long as life lasts, I shall proclaim the true God!’

“‘You are drunk, man! Let him be thrown into the Tiber to cool his heated brain, let a large stone be put round his neck, and throttle him well; thus may his noisy tongue be silenced. Away with him!’

“The peremptory order was executed. ‘We love not that work hang on our hands,’ observed Gallienus; ‘forward with the other prisoners.’

“‘Olympius, you have served the Empire faithfully, and I grieve to see you consort with these madmen. see this tripod placed before Minerva’s statue; throw but a few grains of incense on the fire, and all shall be restored to you, your forfeited honours and your Sovereign’s trust.’

“The tribune disdained to answer, but lifting up his eyes to Heaven, sang, ‘Glory be to God on high!’

“‘And you, Sempronius,’ continued the Cæsar, who had quite assumed the part of a judge, ‘reveal where your master’s riches are concealed, and not only shall a good share be awarded you, but your life will be spared.’

“‘I have deposited my master’s treasures in his name, there where the moth eats not, neither can the rust consume.’

“‘Then die! take your mangled limbs to a fiery death, and perhaps the scorching flames will bring you to reveal your secret. Let these two be consumed by fire; a great honour for such as they to be offered to the gods.’ And they were led away singing hymns of praise.

“Hippolytus was next brought forward. ‘Ah, here comes one,’ said the Emperor, scoffing at him, ‘who, hiding like a rat in a hole, has spread corruption in Rome, working under ground. Where is the money with which you bought the people? where are the treasures concealed in your den of thieves?’

“‘Gold and silver I have none!’ replied Hippolytus meekly; ‘but what the Lord Jesus has been pleased to confide to me, that, in His name, I give.’

“‘Give it here then!’

“‘Thou art not worthy!’

“‘Speakest so to Cæsar?’

“‘I am a Roman citizen; I respect the laws of my country, and Rome respects her sons.’

“‘Let him be beaten on the face!’ cried Gallienus.

“And forthwith the servile executors of the tyrant’s behests did as they were ordered, and I saw the blood gush from the face of Hippolytus, but, at the same time, he prayed aloud, and I, concealed in the crowd, prayed too, that his sufferings might be united to those of the Man-God, disfigured in His doleful passion. Shall I go on, lady?” proceeded Claudius, wiping from his brow the moisture caused by his irrepressible anguish. “I see my young mistress sickens at the recital.”

“No,” said Flora; “I rejoice in their triumph; but

Hippolytus was our best, our truest friend, and that he should be treated so ignominiously is a bitter trial for all of us. Tell me, are they all condemned ?”

“ All ! but not executed ; Hippolytus is to be submitted to another trial to-night. Adrias has already refused to sacrifice, and, if he persist, is to be scourged to death ; his wife and children are to share his fate.”

“ And my poor little Lucilla ? ”

“ Nemesion offered his life to save hers, but the Cæsar laughed, and said she must prove her innocence. The great heat of the day put an end to the sitting, which is to be resumed at sunset.”

“ And then Paulina and Lucilla will be examined. Mother, we must pray that their strength may not fail them ; we ought to be witnesses to their confession of faith ! ”

“ Child ! ”

“ It is a duty, mother ; God will give us the necessary courage to fulfil it. Let us, by our presence, assist our suffering brethren.”

“ You are right, Flora, and, as Laurentius cannot return till to-morrow, we are free, and can keep our intention secret from all the house.”

They separated, and attended to their home occupations till the hour came, then they assumed the disguise of those who sold bread, a class of women so numerous in Rome that they could pass through the streets unobserved at any hour. Accompanied by the faithful Claudius, the ladies proceeded to the Forum, and mingled in the crowd.

They were all there now. A strange mercy in those so cruel had allowed Adrias to embrace once more his wife and children, and Lucilla to look up into her father's face as they brought her to his side. Perhaps they thought this indulgence would unnerve the martyrs, but each father, as he bent over his dear ones, whispered to them words of energy and of hope, bidding them to be faithful to the end ; and the children promised to be worthy of the name they bore, and from that hour they knew no fear.

The Emperor Valerian did not return to the tribunal that evening ; perhaps he blushed that the majesty of Roman law should be degraded to acts of tyranny and wrong, perhaps he feared retribution from the God of the Christians, Whom he did not know, but Whose power he suspected. The blood-thirsty Gallienus alone held his place as in the morning. The examination began by the youngest prisoners.

"Sacrifice on this altar. Cast incense to the gods," was proposed to Eone and Maia.

"We cannot ! we are Christians !" they answered at once.

"You know not what you say. Do as it is commanded to you."

"We obey Jesus Christ."

"You shall be whipped, as is the meed of disobedient children."

"Even unto death if it please God."

In these answers Maia took the lead, and her little brother, watching her lips as she spoke, formed his

answers on hers. Paulina listened to them with exultation and wonder.

"These then, woman," said the tyrant addressing her, "are the children you have borne for our country's ruin."

"A glory to their country as to their faith."

"Traitors as the viper's brood."

"True to their God and to their Emperor if you allowed them."

"You shall perish with them."

"I bless thee, Cæsar, for the first time."

"And you, Adrias, will you encourage these in their revolt, or purchase their lives and yours by sacrificing to the gods?"

The father's features quivered. Their lives! could he indeed purchase them? It was but a momentary thought, the last pang of nature before she expired within the brave Roman: "I prefer to die, Cæsar, as becomes me".

"Nay, you shall not," replied the tyrant, gnashing his teeth with impotent rage, "you shall not die as becomes you, for you shall be scourged as a slave, you and all these here; the arm of the executioner shall not weary, even when the ground shall be saturated with your blood; you and your wife and your children, and this man, who poisoned the minds of the people, must die under the lash, and your bodies shall be left for the dogs to gnaw."

Adrias grew pale at the prospect of this hideous, shameful doom. Nemesion stepped forward, and with a bold, stern air; "I have not been examined, Cæsar," he said, "yet here I publicly profess my faith; but the sentence

you have pronounced is not for me ; I am a Roman soldier”.

“Untrue to your sovereign.”

“True ! most true ! I will obey you in all that meets my duty ; even now I am ready to gird my sword and defend your throne. The day will come when your father may mourn over the loss of the brave hearts that would have fought for him.”

“Croak not of evil like a bird of ill omen. For the garb you bear, and for the services which are registered of you, you shall suffer an honourable death, and die by the axe.”

“And my child ! give me a soldier’s reward—a mild death for her. Gallienus, you too are a father ; be merciful !”

The Cæsar mused. “Let her be flung into the Tiber,” he said ; “it is the gentlest death ; but she may avoid that too. Will you offer sacrifice to the gods, girl, instead of throwing away your life for a shadow ?”

“Let me die with my father,” she shrieked, but the lictors were already bearing him away, and he waved his hand to her. When she saw herself alone she gathered her *stola* around her with modest dignity, and said, calmly : “I am a Christian, take me to my doom”.

“Are you so anxious to die ?” they replied, wonderingly ; “you must wait till night-fall, we drown no one in the day-time ;” and they took her back to prison.

The sentence of the other martyrs was to be executed in the Forum. Paulina was tied up the first to the

pillar of flagellation, where all criminals were scourged previously to being put to death; but the agony of shame soon rendered her insensible, and before her white *stola* had been torn by the blows she had expired, more from a rush of blood to the heart than from the effects of the torture. At the very first lash her delicate frame writhed, and her features were distorted in her efforts to suppress the expression of her sufferings, and encourage her children. Brave little hearts! they were subjected to the inhuman punishment until their tender bodies fell a mangled, bleeding mass before their father, and then he, with bruised soul but undaunted courage, stretched out his hands to the lictors, imploring them to deal with him roughly that he might die soon. But Claudius would not allow his mistress to be a witness to this horrid scene. As soon as Paulina had fallen lifeless to the ground he urged Flora to leave. "Come away," he said, "let us watch where they take Lucilla to-night; we may meet her in the dark, and, unperceived, administer to her words of comfort."

And they went home in their disguise, with their load of bread untasted and unoffered, with their hearts very sick; and at nightfall, robed in black like slaves, and veiled, the mother and daughter went out again on their self-appointed task.

"They will throw her off from the bridge of Antonine," said Claudius; "let us follow the streets that lead thither." Before they had proceeded far they saw the gleam of torches; in their light shone the axes of the lictors, in whose midst was a young girl with white

maiden *stola*, her hands manacled ; a crowd was following, which Claudius and his party joined.

“*Esto parata, ecce Sponsus venit*,” whispered Flora. The words reached the ear of the captive, and the guards wondered why a smile played on her lips, why a sweet happy expression sat upon her brow. Other voices reached her, the wailings of the kind-hearted plebeian women as they gazed on her loveliness and mourned her fate, the reviling of her guards as they bid her give up the foolish contest before it was too late. She proceeded with a firm step. She remembered that even thus had her sister gone to her doom in the midst of lictors, yet innocent as herself—even thus, bravely, nobly did it behove a tribune’s daughter to die !

She reached the Antonine bridge, and that group, so like a funeral, halted.

“Say but one word, maiden,” urged one of the soldiers with respectful compassion, “say that you believe in the gods of Rome.”

“I have resisted Cæsar,” she answered, “think you I would hearken to you now, at the very hour of victory ?”

Again a sweet voice arose from the crowd, “*Sponsa Christi, accipe coronam*,” and again Lucilla smiled.

“Pause and reflect once more, lady.”

“I will !” she replied ; and kneeling down in the face of all present, with her hands leaning on the iron bars which then formed the bridge’s sole parapet, she raised to heaven the eyes that once were sightless, and in a still clear voice murmured her last prayer. She com-

mended to God her sister, her only love ; she implored pardon for her persecutors, and the light of faith for Rome. For her father she did not pray, knowing full well he had preceded her into glory, where she hoped to join him ; then, uniting her sacrifice to that which is daily offered in the Church, she recited the Apostles' Creed from beginning to end.

Then she rose to her feet ; the moon appeared above the horizon suddenly, as it often does on Italian summer nights. Lucilla felt her face bathed in the pleasant stream of light, and smoothed her hair with that pertinacity of habit which is wont to resume its sway in trifles, when the mind is most absorbed. She gathered her garments round her, with the instinct of Christian modesty ; they advised her to loosen her girdle, for thus she might have a chance of floating and being saved, but she only fastened it more tightly.

"Is there not a stone to be hung round my neck ?" she asked.

"We would fain not subject you to that additional pain," they replied, for verily they were disarmed by her gentleness.

"Obey your orders," she said firmly.

"Noble lady, it would be useless cruelty in your case ; we can and will spare you the breaking and tearing asunder of the muscles produced by the weight which causes too rapid a fall. Once more, will you sacrifice?"

"To my God alone I offer my life !"

They lifted her up kindly, nay, almost reverently, for they felt overawed, as if in the presence of a superior

being; one moment they balanced her in the air, and the moonbeams rested on her white *stola*, while she lay calm and motionless in their arms, like a beacon star above the waters. Another moment, and she glided from them, as they observed to each other afterwards, without a cry, without a struggle, without even a mortal's weight. They looked down and the stream was hardly ruffled on its surface, but they watched where the moonbeams fell, and they saw them lighting up a white floating mass which followed the current beneath the curling waves.

Towards morning, while the moon was still struggling with early dawn, there wandered on the Tiber's banks two women with a slave. Alternately they knelt down, stooping over the water, and the man waded, for the river was shallow there, full of sand and choked with weeds, which turned away the current. While they stood thus, straining their eyes to look out in the uncertain light, the youngest lady called out, "Lo! it comes," and they all three saw, floating in the waters, a human form. It was entangled in briars which impeded its progress, and encircled it so tightly as to fasten the garments round it till the very feet were covered. The morning breeze blew into that part of the veil which remained above the waters, and it spread like a shroud such as the martyr's virgin modesty would have desired. The body was carried on, nearer and nearer, until it came into the shallow waters, and the slave who had been standing barefoot in the stream awaiting its approach knelt down as it reached him,

and with extended arms he stopped the precious burthen on its downward course. From the shore where the ladies stood, they saw him stoop to kiss the marble-white feet, then slowly, reverently, he raised Lucilla and brought her to land. The water streamed from her impregnated garments, and when he laid her on the grass, the veil that had enshrouded her sunk down as if its task were done: it had brought her to her Christian brethren. The ladies came close up to her now, though the man told them the sight was too painful for them, and he tried in vain to keep them at a distance; but they had loved her too long and too faithfully to give up their last watch by the dead.

It was sad indeed to gaze into that sweet face, whose eyes, closed as they once had been in blindness, were now sunk in eternal sleep. The cheeks were livid, and moistened as if with tears; the body was cold and stiff. Flora's thoughts recurred to that night, when, death-like as this, Volumnia had been raised from her living grave. How like her Lucilla looked now! Poor sisters, so fondly attached to each other, was the bond between those two snapped indeed? One had been taken, one had been left!

Claudius dug for her a shallow, temporary grave, and in the night Christians came and bore her to her resting-place in the Catacombs. There she sleeps, awaiting the resurrection!—Lucilla Nemesia, daughter of the tribune. Flowers were laid on her grave, not for nine days only according to the custom of mourners, but as long as another life lasted which had been almost one with hers!

Flora wept bitterly over the last of her friends ; of those young girls who were once gathered together on Mount Aventine, she now stood alone ! The chosen phalanx had died, but not one had surrendered.

CHAPTER XXXV.

“**L**ORD! it is good for us to be here! Let us build three tents, one for Thee, one for Moses, one for Elias! And, as he yet spoke, a luminous cloud covered them, and a voice was heard, saying: ‘This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him’.”

The sacred words echoed through those vaults, first cradle of our faith, where a Pontiff, seated on a yet blood-stained Apostolical Chair, taught his flock that they were sent into the world like lambs among wolves, and that resistance was powerless against tyrants, and for them death would indeed be victory. It was the feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord, and, like the sower gone out to sow his seed, Pope Sixtus had come betimes among his people, to break among them the Bread of Life.

There was an unwonted solemnity in the supreme pastor’s manner, and when he interpreted his Master’s words, it was with that thrilling tenderness with which we speak of one we have lately seen. As he dwelt on the Immaculate Robes, the Transparent Light, the Overpowering Beauty of Jesus on the Mount, those who heard him said one to another: “Is this indeed our Father Sixtus who speaketh, or is it perchance one of the apostles, who witnessed the triumph of Thabor?”

He told them of the Great Master, Who had called a few to the mountain-top while others might gaze on Him from afar. To His chosen ones He spoke of suffering and death, because there is no earthly glory so great as to lay down our life for the God we love. And thus, never had He been so beautiful, never had His features borne so visibly the character of a conquering King, as on this day, when, Redeemer and God, He had offered Himself to His Father to suffer for the sins of men! He, the Great One, clothed in unearthly greatness, had chosen that very hour to declare that He had come to die like one of them!

Oh, would they not go to Him? They to whom it had been permitted to come and gaze upon His beauty, not from afar off, but at His very feet, would they not arise and listen to His voice, which told the story of His Death and Passion? That thrilling love scene ever old and ever new! Were they not ready to follow Him to prison and to death?

And there arose from among his hearers a long, low, suppressed murmur, as of those, who, having hushed every feeling and thought to identify themselves more completely with one they were hearkening to, now that his voice ceased, broke out into an exclamation which was the echo of his own: "We will follow Him and thee, even unto prison and to death!"

Sixtus looked round upon them, while a deep flush mantled his cheek; for he could not help feeling what a marvellous power had been granted to his words, and to a Roman soul it was doubtful which was the greater

triumph, whether to remain master of a battle-field or of the *rostrum*, to conquer a revolted people by force, or to subjugate them by the sweetness of human eloquence.

Had Sixtus been a pagan he would have ranked as a Cicero in the Roman Forum; but in the midnight congregation and the subterranean council halls he gained a meed dearer to a Christian heart: he lived for posterity, because he taught others to die for God!

"You *will* follow me, brethren!" he repeated. "Verily, the Spirit of God has breathed over you, and truth has fallen from your lips; you *will* follow me, for, as the shepherd at the head of his flock, so will Sixtus walk before you. Oh, my children, pray for me, that I may go with a firm step to my doom, so that my footsteps may sink into the earth, thereby showing to others a pathway to tread."

He stretched out his arms to bless them, for he was overpowered by deep emotion, and could no longer trust himself to speak; but he made a sign to the deacons to robe him for the Sacrifice, and went to the altar. Half an hour of solemn silence ensued, during which the Mystical Lamb was offered up and partaken of. After this the faithful came round him again and touched his garments, bidding him farewell; some of them, as they kissed his hands, thought they felt cold to the touch, as if they belonged to a body whose spirit has already departed; and they remembered this impression later, when they recalled the memory of that leave-taking. One by one the worshippers left the Catacombs; the shadows of the yet kneeling groups grew darker on the

walls as the lamps were put out by the acolyths ; in the chapel, where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, the Pontiff still remained in profound adoration ; near him was a deacon, and a little further off, where the female members of the congregation were gathered apart, knelt side by side Siona and her daughter.

Invisible Presence of a Great One Who dwells among us, known only by a few, sweetly dost Thou draw the human heart with the chords of Adam, the chords of love. Like the Voice of God speaking to Adam in the garden Thou callest us by name,—Thou hast known us from the beginning, Thou has loved us with an Eternal Love ! Who can think of these things and not feel that Thy Uncreated Wisdom would not have been understood, Thy Bountiful Providence would have left a void, Thy Omnipotence would not have been sensibly felt, had it not been for the crowning gift of Thy Real Sacramental Presence, Which continues among us Thy Divine and Human Life. Oh, Blessed Truth ! ever old and new, ever incomprehensible, yet sweet and soothing, alike to the Christian of two thousand years ago, as to the Catholic of to-day !

Sixtus left the rude altar and drew near to that Christian family whom we know so well : “ I have not seen you for some days,” he observed ; “ Flora, have you been ill ? you are much altered in appearance, my child”.

“ I am too sensitive, Father ; I have grieved too much at losing the very last of the young companions I so dearly loved ; but I have much to thank God for, since He has left me my mother and Laurentius.”

"And you, noble lady," he continued, addressing Siona, "you have given so much to God that the measure of your offering would seem almost filled up; but who knows what the future may unfold?"

"Father!" she replied, submissively joining her hands, yet in that tone of respectful inquiry which expects an explanation.

"Father," urged Laurentius, "your words of this night have in them the mournfulness of one who speaks for the last time."

"You have divined rightly, my son."

"Holy Father, are you going on a journey?"

"I go to my Father and to yours, to my God and to your God."

"But why speak you thus? There is nothing to fear now that Gallienus has gone to resist the invasion of the Franks; have we not ever seen that a time of peace for the Empire was one of danger to the Christians, and when Rome was at war we were at rest?"

"We ought not to estrange our cause from the cause of Rome, my son. Did she but trust us, ours would be the fidelity that persists unto the end, but she is to us rather a stepmother than a parent. The decree is still in force, although both our Emperors have left the city, to fight, each at the head of his respective legions. To Valerian, who has seen the truth, yet does not follow it, God awards a dreadful doom. He is naturally wise and brave, and, had he followed the dictates of his own conscience, his arms would have been blessed, and Rome would have triumphed; but, even as he has trusted to

the Persian gods, so from Persia will arise his punishment and dishonour. Enough! let the future be unveiled by God when it pleases Him. Men may die, Emperors rise or fall—but let our Roman hearts rejoice in this, that there is reserved to Rome a greatness, far above her present glory, beyond even what our fondest wishes could dream for her. To her who despises her Christian children it will be given to spread far and wide the empire of our God. When her greatness disappears before men, then will the hour of her triumph begin. A guardian of the sacred faith we are sowing now like a grain of seed in the depths of the earth, and in the darkness of the night, Rome will wonder at the abundant harvest spread on the surface of her lands, and she will gather in the glorious produce watered by our tears and our blood. Let us not shudder, my dear ones, at the thought of the death that awaits us; 'tis but the harbinger of Rome's real glory. The city where pagan traditions were so long respected will embrace the truth, slowly, but with a lasting, long-tried, clinging fidelity; she will cherish what once she hated, raise altars to the God she knew not; and, as jealously as she guarded the Trojan Palladium, so will she keep for posterity in the sanctuary of her new temples, under the guardianship of a virgin priesthood, the sacred fire of an imperishable Faith, lit at Heaven's altars, never to be extinguished more."

Sixtus had forgotten to whom he was speaking, his accents vibrated as if he were inspired, his eyes seemed fixed on an invisible page which he alone could read.

Siona, her daughter, and Laurentius had remained sole remnant of the faithful in the Catacombs ; near the entrance watched Claudius while he prayed. They hung in breathless silence on the Pontiff's words ; his enthusiasm had passed on to them, and it was not till he had ceased speaking for some minutes that Laurentius ventured to ask him :

" Holy Father, has it been revealed to you *when* this is to come to pass ? "

" When you and I and all of us shall have done our duty."

The youth bowed his head, put one of his hands in his mother's, the other in his sister's grasp.

" We are all ready, are we not ? " he asked.

Claudius heard the words from where he was kneeling ; he saw it was a compact, and drew near.

" Is there work for me to do ? " he said.

" Yes, my son, more than you think of," replied the Pontiff. " When I spoke even now of Rome, I but related a dream—one of those fore-shadowings with which we are sometimes visited, when a spirit soars above the earth it is soon to leave ; and, strange though it may seem to you, it was given to me to read great things of you. Even as the first-born of your house, Claudius, sheltered St. Peter on his arrival in Rome ; even as the maiden daughters of Pudens collected the blood of the martyrs, and preserved it as the Church's inheritance, even so shall your last-born see Peter's sway recognised universally, and it will be given to her to discover the relics of the Passion of Christ. Watch

over your child, the last of the great house of Car-a-doc. She has been marked, even as Praxedes and Pudentiana, with a sign that can never be effaced, fit symbol of the blood of our crucified Lord. It is not in vain that Helena of the bloody cross shows signs of precocious wisdom ; she has a great destiny to fulfil."

The descendant of Caractacus had fallen prostrate before the Pontiff who revealed to him the Christian glory of his house ; and, even as in the days of slavery he had kissed the handful of earth torn from his parent soil, so now he pressed his lips to the ground. Rome was sacred to him from that hour.

"My children," resumed the Pontiff, with his usual calm demeanour, "I must leave you now. My house has been surrounded since yesterday. I stole away, unperceived, to come and offer the Mysteries a last time among you ; to bid farewell to you in particular, my well-beloved children in the Lord ; to commend to thee, Laurentius, the treasures of the Church."

"But how, holy Father, can I save them from the hands of our despoilers ? If I secrete the sacred vessels in my mother's house, they will be searched for and plundered."

"Do as you think best, my son. I leave you, besides, the care of the poor, and they are our principal treasure ; gold vessels used in the administration of the Divine Mysteries are but secondary in the sight of One Who chose for His cradle a manger, for His death-bed a cross."

"Holy Father, an idea strikes me,"—the youth hesi-

tated, and, in that moment of anguish, strange to say, the light-heartedness of youth brought a smile to his lips ; “ shall I make one treasure serve the other, and thus cheat our oppressors of their expected booty ? shall I distribute the treasures among the poor ? ”

“ Rightly and nobly thought ! Be it so. And now, what messages shall I bear from you, daughters, to our heavenly Father’s kingdom ? ”

“ You ask none from Laurentius, holy Father,” observed Flora, as, with anxious gaze, she strove to read the unmistakable expression of the Pontiff’s eye.

He bent down and whispered : “ Because he will follow me soon ”.

She grew very pale, but murmured not a word.

They clung to his garments, but he disengaged himself gently.

“ Do not detain me,” he urged, “ lest those who have connived at my temporary absence, and are even now on the watch for my return, should suffer for my sake.”

“ Holy Pontiff,” cried Laurentius, “ how canst thou proceed without thy deacon ? Father, how canst thou go forth without thy son ? Thou wert never wont to offer the Sacrifice unless I ministered to thee. In what have I displeased thy Paternity ? In what hast thou found me failing or pusillanimous ? Am I not he to whom thou didst commit the dispensation of the Blood of the Lord ?* Let me follow thee ; Father, thou canst not, must not leave me.”

* Laurentius’ words are taken from the Breviary. See his feast, X. Aug., II. Noct.

And, kissing the robes he was accustomed to hold, while the priest raised the Lord of hosts at the Mass, Laurentius urged his petition with all the impetuosity of youth, with the tearful earnestness of a child.

His mother and sister listened to him in silence, their hearts prepared, as those of martyrs, for struggle and for victory. The Pontiff looked at them, then at his deacon, then raised his eyes to Heaven.

"I do not leave thee, Laurentius," he resumed, "I desert thee not, I only go a little before thee; to thee it will be given to suffer great things for Christ. We who are old have a shorter space to run, and the prize is awarded to us more easily; a difficult and glorious triumph awaits thee."

He pressed his aged lips to the young Levite's brow, and whispered low, lest Siona should hear: "Thou shalt follow me in three days!"

The young man sprang to his feet, his countenance lit up with joy; the very sound of his voice was changed.

"Far be it from us, Holy Father, to retard the hour of thy triumph; let thy blessing rest on us once more ere thou depart. Thou hast kindled within us a mighty thirst, and I understand how it must torment thee until it be assuaged. Fear not! I shall fulfil my trust."

"I feel sure of you all," said Sixtus, and his hand rested for a moment on the brow of each; and he left, alone; for he bid them, for greater security, remain where they were till he was far on his way. His blessing remained with them, and bore its fruit. They never saw him more.

Laurentius fell into profound silence after the Pontiff's departure; those last words of the venerable man had imparted to him almost a new being. Long and fervently they prayed all together, in the shadows of the tombs they loved, where slept so many that had fallen by their side. As they rose to depart, Laurentius looked back. Was it with a lingering affection for the sacred spot he was never to visit more? was it with an involuntary shudder at the fate that awaited him? He hardly knew; but his lips repeated inaudibly the words that had sunk deep into his heart: "I shall follow him in three days".

Flora's eye caught his; she had long been the confidant of his every thought, and she guessed the nature of the Pontiff's last words to him. She made a sign to Claudius to attend to her mother, and, for herself, followed with Laurentius.

"Dear brother, I do not ask you what has made you so happy, but let us keep our dear mother calm."

"Yes!" he replied, "I wish we could keep her in ignorance of my fate until all is over."

"You are right, for her health is so shattered that any new shock may endanger her life. Let us try to persuade her to remove to our country house at Aricia for a few days."

She returned to the side of Siona, and said with assumed indifference: "Mother, I would speak to Claudius of our olive groves, for my brother is so neglectful of our temporal concerns that I fear our farms at Aricia are going into ruin. The *villicus* has everything in his own hands."

“What a strange moment for this idea to come into your mind,” said her mother. Claudius, with the intuition of a faithful old servant, understood at once that his young mistress had some grave motive in introducing this subject, which he entered upon forthwith with marvellous enthusiasm.

“Oh, dear Lady, how I should like to see those olive groves again ; they are all planted by my own hand. Well do I remember the day when my noble master Florentius chose the field for our yet unplanted grove. Nay ! he loved agriculture so well that he himself measured the *scrobes* (pits four feet wide every way), which he prepared a year beforehand, so that the earth might be thoroughly pulverized. We mixed stones and gravel at the bottom, and scattered a few grains of barley over the whole. My dear master would not allow any one to support the young trees but himself and me, while the slaves covered the roots with earth. I long to see how they have grown. We left them room to spread, sixty feet between each row, and forty between each tree ; the rows were arranged so as to run from east to west, in order that the cool breezes might sweep down freely the open spaces in summer. When I left you, many years ago, they had been made to grow into a single stem without branches, until they had reached the height of our tallest ox : after that very little labour indeed would be needed to keep them in order. How I should like to see your present *villicus*, and instruct him on the management of olive trees.”

“Why, this is instruction sufficient to make any one

an agriculturist," interposed Laurentius, with that playful manner so inherent to his nature; "but had I to direct an operation such as you describe, I should have consulted Virgil and followed his method—

“Quin et caudicibus sectis, mirabile dictu,
Truditur e sicco radix oleagina ligno.”

“Nay, young master, pardon me, I do not approve of that system, in which the tree is cut down, and the stock cut into pieces nearly the size and shape of an onion; these *novelli* are dipped into manure, put into the earth, where they soon throw up shoots, are transplanted at the end of one year, and in three years more are fit to form an olive yard grove. We, on the contrary, selected from young healthy trees branches of such a thickness as to be easily held in the hand. We sawed them into lengths of a foot and a half each, taking care not to injure the bark; these *trunci* we tapered to a point at each end; smearing the extremities with ashes, we buried them upright in the ground, so that the tops were a few fingers' breadth below the surface. During the first year we loosened the ground frequently with a *sarculum*; later on, we used heavy rakes, and when we transplanted them the fourth year, what strength and vigour was there!”

“Claudius, your talents are lying waste,” resumed Laurentius; “it is quite a mistake for me to attempt to be a scholar; I shall give you up all my books, and you must turn author; write on Natural History like another Pliny!”

“Good Claudius,” interposed Siona, “your devotion to our interests is so constant that I have no words to thank you !”

“My dear mistress, I was so happy in your service : but how different you look now from what you did at Aricia. Your health is wasting away ; oh, that I could prevail upon you to return to the invigorating air and peaceful pursuits of those days.”

“I think you are right. I should indeed like to seek the country, and it would be prudent to withdraw into retirement during these times of persecution.”

“I am glad you think so, mother,” observed Flora, “the town air is so oppressive at this season ; when shall we go ?”

“It will not do for the whole household to disperse,” interposed Laurentius, “that might excite suspicion ; do you go first, dear mother, with Flora.”

“And leave you, my son ! you to whom my widowed heart clings more than ever ; you whom I most wish to screen from danger, did I not know the aspirations of your brave heart ! Even now, when you spoke so earnestly to our Holy Father Sixtus, he addressed to you words which seemed to fill you with joy ; may I ask you what they were ?”

“I cannot answer you, dear mother.”

“Then I can guess for myself. Your own calmness and your wish to remove me from Rome prove to me that you expect soon to meet your doom ; you dread my weakness, and would fain spare me suffering. Oh, my son ! what has ever been the glory of a Roman mother ?

Was it not to gird her son for the battle-field, to present him with his sword and shield ? ”

Laurentius stooped to kiss her hand, for he was proud to hear her speak thus. They had now reached the very door of their own home, and, before crossing the threshold she had once passed over as a happy bride, Siona laid both her hands on the beauteous head of her adopted son, and, pressing her lips to his forehead, “ Never shall I leave thee,” she said, “ till a martyr’s crown rest upon this brow ”.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

S IONA persisted in her resolution, notwithstanding all the good reasons Flora brought forward to urge upon her the necessity of withdrawing to the country for a little while. "What!" she would reply, "there was a mother who underwent a sevenfold death, rather than lose sight of the sons she had herself prepared for martyrdom. What though sick at heart she looked on, until the pangs of that spiritual motherhood outdid the sufferings of the first! And would you have me, Flora, care for myself alone, neglecting my precious charge? No; a Roman soldier dies at his post, even so a Roman matron."

The only change effected in the family residence was a removal from Mount Aventine to their more secluded town house near the Tiber, which, during the lifetime of Florentius, they had been in the habit of letting to foreigners from Gaul or other parts of the Empire coming to Rome for a short time.

A few days passed before Flora found it necessary to make known to her mother what Laurentius had thought prudent to conceal. He had been summoned to deliver up the treasures of the Church, and had coolly answered the myrmidons of the law, they were welcome to come and inspect them. He had then sent a message round

to a good number of Christian poor, who would soon fill the house, and he thought it advisable for the ladies to leave it.

“Brave boy!” exclaimed Siona, and a faint smile played on her lips ; it was the lambent light of memory, not the bright ray of joy which had passed away from her features for ever. “Brave boy ! truly the Attic wit his father cultivated in him prompted that ironical reply to the soldiers, and they will not forgive him the pleasantry.”

There was a slight noise behind them. Laurentius had entered ; light and buoyant of step as when a child coming home from school, with books even now piled up under his arm, his *toga* neatly clasped on his shoulder, with that symmetry which arises from intercourse with the gentle sex ; he had been early formed to that courtesy of good breeding which constitutes the charm of daily life. He bent over his mother's hand and kissed it, then retained it within his own with a lingering fondness, and gazed at her silently. Perhaps it occurred to him how necessary was the support of his strong arm to the frail beings before him, one of whom was sinking into premature old age, the other budding into womanhood. Who would care for them, protect them, be to them a brother and son, as he had been ? The perfume of the lilies from the garden was wafted in by the evening breeze, and it brought an answer to his thoughts : “They weave not, neither do they spin, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these”. Was there not One above to Whom he could confide *his* lilies ?

"I see Flora has not succeeded in the charge I gave her," he observed, after a short silence which was more eloquent than words; "I should have wished to spare you the pain of parting, dear mother."

"Do not fear for me, Laurentius, I am calm and prepared, and so are you, are you not?"

"Yes! I have taken leave of the brethren, and settled all my little personal property. Here are my books, in which I have learned both sacred and profane lore; I have brought them to Flora, who first taught me to read. And now, mother, since you will not retire to a place of safety, bless me, and give me your messages for the next life; this is the last hour we shall spend together! Oh, mother, I need your blessing and your prayers."

Here he knelt down before her with the simplicity of a child.

"There is an hour of weakness which many experience, ere the supernatural grace flows on them, which prepares them for their fate. Wonder not that Laurentius should grow faint-hearted under the pressure of anguish of mind when Our Great Master sank under the load in the garden of His Agony, as he knelt there in the shadow of the Cross. An Angel from God was sent to comfort Him, and I too come to seek for assistance from you, who, like a Guardian Spirit, watched over the lonely cradle of the orphan Laurentius: my feeble existence was developed under the fostering influence of a mother's and a sister's love; such were the pure fountains of my heart's life, that imparted to

me the living waters of faith. Oh, let me come to you now to seek refreshment for my soul, parched with anguish under the fiery breath of temptation. I have heard it observed that in those who are about to die the human frame undergoes a strange disorder before the final dissolution, as if the poor clay were returning already to its original elements. Like the earth which, previous to a storm, opens its pores to the rain from Heaven, even thus do I feel; a burning fever consumes me. Mother, I thirst—I thirst.”

He laid his head in her lap, yet she knew it was not to hide his tears, for the looking at death, face to face, had dried up his eyes in their sockets; she put her hand on his curly locks, generally moist and flexible, as is the wont of those whose nature is gentle, and behold! his hair was now harsh and dry, as if touched by fire. She bathed his temples with her linen veil, moistened in cold water, and it was dried at once at the contact of the young life-blood that throbbed so fast in the swollen veins. The youth had spoken truly; there was a fire within!

Oh, that cry that had burst from him! It was the wail of nature in her agony . . . the death-note which has passed the lips of each son of Adam, from that first one who fell slain by his brother, to the Man-God hanging on the cross; and Siona thought of that last moan of dereliction which sacred lips had uttered and hallowed, when the holy One of Israel was slain by His own people. Oh, God! what a thought! Why did it come to her now? Was that innocent Blood which her

Jewish forefathers had called upon themselves as a malediction falling now on the head of her sister's son—her adopted child? Was it for this that he felt weak at the approach of martyrdom, when others had grown strong? Would the grace of God abandon him, in punishment of the sins of his ancestors? Oh, doubt, doubt! how often art thou the fiery dart which sears the heart that cold steel had left unscathed! Thou art the scorching, poisonous blast which, passing over the soul's freshness, leaves a desert behind.

Siona writhed under the mental torture. The sword had entered her soul; but another image arose to her mind, and it soothed her. A woman had stood under the cross whereon the Saviour of the world was expiring; Mary, a daughter of Israel like herself, had stood there, helpless, yet powerful, by the force of her mighty love. *Et stabat Mater!* Siona thought of her and prayed. But Siona had another comfort. She, at least, was not alone.

Flora, always her faithful companion, was by her side even now, and her mission was ever to console. She knelt down by her brother, speaking, not to him, but to God; her eyes raised to heaven with that far-away look peculiar to her, she seemed to be receiving a message which she was to impart to others; and, presently, turning to Laurentius, she said, in a voice where the gentleness of love mingled with the firmness of authority:

“Brother, arise! strength will be granted to you; trust to Him Who has called you to the death He met before you; like His, your task is one of expiation for

those we have loved. His eye has rested on you, even as on the young man in the Gospel to whom He spoke, yet who would not obey. Laurentius, the destiny pointed out to our forefather has been left to us to fulfil. Arise! leave all things and follow Him!"

And while she spoke, Siona felt her courage return; she stooped over the kneeling youth, and tears fell from her eyes so fast that his locks glistened with the welcome dew; the sister's words and the mother's tears acted, as he himself had expressed it, as a refreshing moisture to the parched earth, and when the young deacon arose, pale and exhausted from his fierce internal combat, yet calm and recollected, with hands modestly crossed on his breast, and with that firm tread which announces that a decisive struggle is over, radiance and beauty again suffused his features, and Flora's thoughts reverted to that passage relating to St. Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles: "And his face, as they gazed on him, grew as the face of an angel".

And verily there lay before him, through the destroying fires, a martyr's path to the heavenly crown.

Evening had come on apace, and was fast blending with the shades of night. Claudius came to announce that the strange visitors summoned by his young master had begun to assemble, and Flora went out to attend to them. By and by, charity, which bringeth its own reward, proved to the household an effectual solace in that trying hour. The *Agapæ* were held in the *atrium*, and thither flocked the blind, and maimed, and lame, and poor widows and orphans: all bore the stamp of

poverty. It was indeed a goodly feast, worthy to be given by a martyr to the guests of his God ; and while his mother and sister helped the slaves to serve the brethren, he walked round the tables, discoursing cheerfully as was the wont of hosts ; a touch of his usual gaiety enlivened his conversation, and as his eye rested on Flora, plainly attired, he said with a smile, " This is my nuptial feast, sister ; being affianced to the Church, the bride of Christ, I have invited guests even as those chosen in the Gospel, maimed and unfair to look upon, yet they have donned their best suit, and Flora does not honour the feast by wearing a nuptial garment ".

" I must go to change my *stola*, lest you should expel me," she replied, too happy to see him restored to his ordinary frame of mind.

When the feast was over and the brethren had given thanks, they retired, the women to one part of the house and the men to another, to rest for the night, and soon all that vast assembly slept peacefully under the roof of Laurentius, while its young master watched and prayed. How long he knelt in that mysterious night, preparing as a warrior for the next day's combat, no one knew, save that his sister, when going the next morning to minister anew to the poor, found him already in their midst. She observed the dark lustre of the eyes which had read all night by the lamp's flickering light, and the burning spot on the cheek, which the pillow had not soothed.

" Brother," she said reproachfully, " you needed strength."

“ And I found it.”

She asked no questions, for she felt that her prayers had been heard, and strength conferred on him from above.

The poor people respectfully moved a little aside when their kind hosts addressed each other, and Laurentius profited by the brief interval to take his sister into the garden.

“ I am sorry to precede you, Flora,” he said; “ in every parting the hardest task is to remain.”

“ Let it be as God sees best for us ; my duty is to be my mother’s comforter.”

“ Yet, if God had permitted it, I would willingly have lived a little longer, for you will be very lonely, Flora, and would require a strong arm to lean on through life.” He was silent, then resumed : “ In the course of nature, Flora, our dear mother will quit this world before you. We have no near relation, and it is my duty to think of the future for you.” He stopped, hesitatingly, then resumed : “ I am bound to secure your happiness, even in a worldly sense, unless you have already chosen your own lot ”.

“ Dear brother, I understand your anxiety, and appreciate your thoughtfulness ; but, believe me, I am perfectly happy, and have no wish to change my lot. I should think it wrong to conceal anything from you, particularly at such a time as this.”

“ Thank you, Flora, for your confidence. I need not then go further on this subject.”

“ No, do not fear. He, the great and mighty One to

Whom I have entirely devoted myself, will protect me far better than mortal man."

"You are right, sister. Your words act upon me as the *Modicæ fidei, quare dubitasti?* of Our Lord to St. Peter. I consign you now, peacefully, to the care of our heavenly Father."

Just then they heard in the distance the tramp of horses, the clang of armour, and knew that the Præfect had come with his guards, to claim the promise ironically made to him a few days before. Flora passed into the workroom of the female slaves; some of their coloured garments were hanging around, ready for the day's labour. She drew one of the darkest over her white *stola*, concealed her features under a veil, and passed out into the *vestibulum*, where she could easily hide herself under the porch. There, ranged all round, were the poor, the chosen ones of Christ's flock, the little children to whom the kingdom of heaven is opened; standing in front, the maimed and such as are loathsome in the world's eyes; the Lazarus, despised by the rich but praised by God; the paralytic, whom the world's Saviour disdained not to raise with His own hands, saying to him, "Arise and walk"; the poor widow and the orphan, to whom He, the Eternal One, has promised to be a husband and a father. They were all there, in humble and contented poverty, drawn up in serried ranks, even as those who are ready to do battle for the Lord of Hosts; and a few paces in front of them, like unto the leader of a glorious band, stood the young deacon, peaceful and majestic, with hands

crossed on his breast, with a firm step and unflinching demeanour, ready to confront the armed majesty of Rome!

There was a breathless silence. The Præfect advanced a few steps in front of the guards, and said, addressing Laurentius, "Young man, you promised to show us the treasures of the Church; where are they?"

The deacon tried vainly to suppress the smile which rose to his lips. "I have obeyed you," he said; "the Church's treasures are here."

"Ha! methinks you might have employed safer carriers than this vagrant crew. If they have stolen the smallest coin on the way, as they brought them hither, you shall be responsible. Let the gold and silver be brought forth."

No one stirred.

"Do *you* give your orders, young man, since mine are unavailing," said the Præfect, forcing himself to speak calmly.

"It were in vain, Lord Præfect! gold and silver we have none. You ask me for the treasures confided to my care. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, lodge the homeless, such is the charge assigned to Laurentius, deacon of the Holy Christian Church. The poor are her treasures, because they are the favourites of God."

The Præfect's face became livid with rage. "Mocker and insulter of the Majesty of Rome, I ask you for the hidden wealth intrusted to your care."

"I have none."

"You lie!"

“I am a Roman! Who doubts my given word?”

“But you shall be punished, perfidious youth. Ha! think you that you can laugh at Rome’s magistrate? He will laugh at you. Seize him, lictors, manacle him tightly. Say now, where is the wealth of your Church concealed?”

“In the hearts of those poor who are her first-born, and who plead daily her cause with God. In their poverty are her riches and her safeguard; in our love, her pride; in our sufferings, her increase; in our death, her triumph!”

“Die, then! but not until you have expiated by long, lingering torture the insult offered to the majesty of the law by your flippant tongue.”

The guards approached to execute their orders, but stopped ere they laid their hands on him, for the youth had drawn himself up to his full height; his hands were no longer meekly clasped, but vigorously clenched in the firm attitude of early manhood, and his whole demeanour bespoke the Roman wounded in his sense of justice. And he looked so handsome, so like what the sons of the republic had been in its best days, that they thought involuntarily of the Gracchi of old revolting against tyranny, and dared not touch Laurentius.

Suddenly, from amidst the humble throng of the poor, there arose a low, sweet woman’s voice, so gentle that at any other time it would have passed unnoticed; but at that moment the sight of the concentrated rage of the Præfect, and the mute indignation of Laurentius, had cast a death-like silence over the crowd; they

waited the result in breathless awe, and just then came the voice ; it said : “ Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice’s sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of God ”.

Like the Spirit of God that was, at the beginning, borne over the troubled waters of the deep and assigned them their limits for ever, so was it with the accents of that voice. Laurentius heard and recognised it ; the fierce spirit within him died away, and the Christian regained his meekness. He stretched out his arms, gave his wrists to the lictors, and was bound. He continued erect, his eyes raised to Heaven with the expression so peculiar to his race ; there was on his brow a triumph and a glory surpassing all understanding, and his face, as they looked at him, grew once more as the face of an angel ; they bore him away.

When the minions of the law had passed out with their victim there arose among the throng that remained in the *atrium* the sound of much weeping and wailing. The poor mourned the loss of their benefactor, and would not be comforted. Then the sweet voice which had already spoken was raised again. It said : “ Weep not for him, brethren, he is about to enter into the joy of his Lord ; let us weep over ourselves, and now let us disperse, for much sorrow is nigh ”.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE feeling with which we return to a place where a portion of our life has been previously spent is one of undefined strangeness ; it seems as if not we but another than ourself had lived and loved and suffered amid those scenes, as if he were already dead ; and we, opening the cold tomb, look down shudderingly on those memories, o'er which the warmth of affection has called anew the breath of life, and it arises before us, that form of the past, with its hopes unfulfilled, its faults painfully visible, its buried talents, and its wasted affections, and we bow down, appalled by the apparition, hearkening to its lessons, happy if they come not too late. And this is not all, for that past has a fearful pathos, when it stalks before us through the old haunts and peoples them again with the phantoms of those we have loved, and counts the voids that are left, and throws a pall over our present joys. Yes ! to live over again where we have once lived supposes an intervening death, for that dread messenger comes not once only in our lives : he is daily at his work ; each night tells his victories, each day that goes by the rent-roll of our life has lost a page, and the leaves that record our first years and our first joys are already scattered over our future grave.

Claudius stood on the threshold of that country house at Aricia, where he had lived so long in the service of his old master, Florentius. The town house had been confiscated as the property of Laurentius ; and the once happy household was about to be broken up, for Siona was lying dangerously ill. The noble woman could not survive those for whom she had lived so devotedly, and the shock produced by the capture of Laurentius was too much for her enfeebled frame. The morning light, penetrating the small Roman window, visited her couch with a faint ray, yet too powerful for her sinking vision. She called Flora to exclude it. The faithful girl, who had watched all night by her side, had sunk exhausted on one of those small beds the Romans used for resting on in the day-time ; her eyes were closed, and she did not hear her mother's voice. Nature has her respite even when the mind is most troubled with anxious sorrow. A favourite slave, however, who was in attendance, came in at the same moment, and gently awoke her young mistress, making her a sign she was wanted without. From her silent look, Flora understood that some message of great moment had been forwarded from Rome, and, with a strong effort to conceal her emotion, she said :

“ I am going to see what Claudius wants, dear mother ; meanwhile, Simplicia will take good care of you till I return ; try and sleep.”

It was a long time, however, before Flora resumed her post ; her countenance bore the traces of much weeping.

Siona raised towards her an anxious, supplicating look.

"You have heard news of Laurentius," she said ; "let me know his sentence."

A thrill of anguish passed over the girl, and she knelt down, hiding her face in the coverlet : "Do not ask me," she gasped out.

The invalid would not urge her, for she knew those pure lips could not utter any word but the strict truth. She was silent for a minute or two, then said calmly : "God will strengthen me to hear the worst".

Then Flora, raising her head, pursued in a trembling voice : "Laurentius has sent you a message, asking you to bless him before God, for he can never more come to claim the maternal benediction as was his wont ; he bids you be of good heart, for he feels brave and even joyful, remembering that it is to His elect Christ spoke the word : 'Si vis perfectus esse, veni sequere me !' "

Siona listened with calm earnestness, clasped her hands, and said : "Thus then will he fulfil the call once given to the head of our house. My God, I thank Thee. But who brought this message, daughter ?"

"A trusty slave of Hippolytus, son of the centurion, whom Laurentius has been instructing for some months past, and who was baptised by him last night in his prison !"

"Oh, what a happiness ! it is almost too much for me to bear."

Siona sank back exhausted, much to the relief of her daughter, who raised a silent act of thanksgiving to

Heaven, that her dying mother was thus kept in ignorance of the nature of the youth's martyrdom. As to herself, she had learned through the faithful messenger all the horrible details. Laurentius had been taken to a small dungeon in the Via Urbana, hitherto untenanted by prisoners; it was very damp, as a little stream of clear water ran through it, to supply a neighbouring fountain: at the end of the street was a small square, on which has since been built the Chapel of San Lorenzo in Panisperna. It was purposely arranged that the martyr should be imprisoned near the scene of his torments, for he was a favourite with the people and the poor; and it was feared that if they saw him traverse the streets, going in his manliness and beauty to the place of his inhuman execution, they would surround him in vast numbers and tear him from the hands of the lictors. Hippolytus, whose father's name was a universal passport, had easily obtained admission to the prisoner, and received at his hands the regenerating waters of baptism. The dungeon brooklet had thus been consecrated a baptismal font. All this had been faithfully transcribed on a wax tablet which the messenger gave Flora, but the manner of death was not mentioned, though mysteriously alluded to by the writer in these words: "God came to cast fire on the earth, and what willed He, but that it be kindled? This is Laurentius' farewell."

Flora had received the message in the presence of Claudius, she looked to the latter for an explanation. He divined her intention, and said to the bearer:

"Has your master left anything unwritten which he wishes you to communicate verbally?"

"Yes!" answered the man mournfully, and glancing at Flora with deep respect and compassion, "but it is too painful to speak of that here."

"With your permission, dear lady," said the faithful Claudius, "we shall withdraw a little."

"Thank you, Claudius, do you remain here; I shall walk in that avenue till you have done."

When the brave man rejoined his young mistress, his cheek was blanched, and cold pearly drops stood on his brow: "I can hardly master myself," he said; "what I have to tell makes my old British blood boil with indignation. Oh, that I should have lived to see this day! . . . That I should have to tell you this, in this very spot, where so many years ago I for the first time spoke of Christ to your noble mother."

"We have gone through so much, Claudius," observed Flora calmly, "that we must not flinch now. Perhaps this is the last time Our Lord and Master calls upon us to share His cross."

At this moment of poignant anguish for both their conversation was broken in upon by the little Helena, who came bounding down the avenue in the innocent unconsciousness of childhood, and ran up to her grandfather, stretching out her little hands to pull his beard, a favourite trick of hers. He took her up in his arms, kissed her roseate fingers. "Oh, little one, little one!" he murmured lovingly, "these hereditary stains of thine teach me my duty. What can be more glorious than to

bear testimony to the faith, as our forefathers have done before us ?” He put her away gently, made the sign of the cross on her and on himself, then, folding his arms on his breast, and lifting his eyes to Heaven, he told Flora the dreadful doom that was reserved to her brother, to be burnt alive ! She bore the announcement with great fortitude, and returned to her mother’s side, as we have already seen. She resumed her watch, and the sands of that long day began to run. It was hard to be near that death-bed, straining every nerve to maintain a calm demeanour, while her mind was on the rack. There are times when an inexplicable morbid pertinacity makes our imagination dwell on the very object that sickens us the most ; and so it was now. Every ball falling into the bronze basin which constituted the Roman water-clock seemed to her one of the votes which had decided her brother’s sentence. Her mother’s wasted form lay stretched on one of those carpets formed of wild beasts’ hides, which were considered an article of luxury in Roman homes, and Flora thought of him who would be lying to-morrow on his fiery bed. She pictured him to herself, writhing, oh, God, how fearfully ! How singed his hair ; and on his brow a scar, left by the burning iron ; his temples seared and bruised ; his hands, would they be outstretched as the Redeemer’s on the Cross, or clenched in agony ? And his eyes, would they be closed ? burnt in their sockets ? or would they preserve their power of seeing, till the poor frame had sunk under the fearful torture ?

From the vision she had thus conjured up Flora

turned to the reality. Siona was evidently sinking ; already her poor fingers were painfully busy, as if weaving the last threads of her span of life ; she opened her eyes and fixed them on her daughter, with that vacant gaze which tells of a mind attacked in its stronghold. It was only momentary, however ; consciousness returned as the sleepy torpor which had settled on her for the last few hours wore off.

“ I have been long asleep, methinks.”

“ Yes, mother, it is night.”

“ I would speak with Claudius ; time presses ! ”

Flora started at the import of the words. She understood that her dying parent was looking beyond the things of this world, with a steadfast gaze. Claudius was sent for, and obeyed the summons. The Briton had seen death too often to mistake its seal. In the tremulous accents of his beloved old mistress, in her fast failing sight, he recognised the flickering of the flame that will burn bravely to the end, but whose oil can never be replenished more. He knelt down to hear better.

“ Your wishes, my noble lady ? ”

“ Take care of my daughter ; I cannot leave her in charge of any of our relations in Rome—not one shares our faith. But, as soon as possible, let Flora join Volumnia in Etruria. That is what seems to me the best for you, dear child ; leave Rome for a while.”

“ Do not think of me, dear mother : God will provide.”

“ If it be not too late for my last farewell to reach Laurentius, tell him I would fain have stood near him to the end, but my spirit shall be with him in his tor-

ments, and bear to him along with angels the thrice blessed palm."

Her breathing grew heavy, and she ceased to speak. Flora crouched on the ground at her feet, afraid to look up lest she should meet that fixed look, in which the eyes, the mirror of the soul, are veiled for evermore. There was another struggle, another attempt to speak, but this time only incoherent phrases were heard—names of such as she had known and lost. The words were uttered slowly, painfully, as if her interior vision were deciphering characters on far-off tombstones ; she seemed to dwell no more but with the dead. . . . Again she fell off into a heavy sleep, and an hour or two passed by. Early dawn broke in, and the first flush of rosy morning entered the chamber of death, resting for a moment on the sleeping Siona. She awoke, and, with that clearness of mind and speech she had evinced in the night-time: "What is the day of the month?" she asked.

The question surprised them ; but Claudius, who knew there are strange flashes of light of more than human intuition at such times, looked at the tablets in his belt, and answered : "The fifth of the Nones of August".

Siona's features, drawn, and of a death-like whiteness, as if the atmosphere of the tomb had passed over them already, now brightened up for one moment. The lamp was nearly out ; Flora stooped down to catch its last ray ere it was extinguished.

"Rejoice!" said the poor departing spirit, "the fourth of the Nones of August shall be kept holy for future ages ; to-morrow thy brother enters into glory."

The last pangs of agony were spared to that poor frame, already worn out. There was a low gurgling sound, the rushing of a fountain which has ebbed low and stops at last. . . . Siona's earthly career was run.

* * * * *

It is seldom that the shock of death strikes us at once ; the dear one is still there. Paleness has been on that brow for days ; that speechlessness is so like the silence of sleep, over which we have so long watched, that, by a merciful dispensation of Providence, the sad truth finds its way but slowly to our hearts, and the very gazing on that beloved one is a comfort. That placidity recalls to us the words of the Saviour : " She is not dead, but sleepeth ". What though the words were said hundreds of years ago, does not each sorrowing heart repeat them to itself while mourning near a death-bed ? Are they not the sole pledge of life to that poor clay ?—the best consolation is inscribed on a grave-stone : Resur-gam, I shall rise again.

Flora remained a considerable time motionless, in the same attitude in which she had received her mother's last sigh. Unconsciously she looked on with apparent apathy, the reaction, in her case, of a mind overwrought by conflicting emotions ; other hands than hers touched the dear corpse. She was powerless to advise or to command, and the slaves did their work quietly, practised in the last honours to be rendered to the dead. They perfumed with precious spices the body of Siona, and dressed her in her noblest matron's robes. Then,

on the same bed where she had expired, she was borne out, with feet turned to the door, as the traveller who goes on a journey. With face, hands, and feet uncovered, she was laid in the *atrium*, that all passers-by might come and look at her ; while the waxen effigies of her husband's ancestors were grouped around her. It was only then, when the death chamber remained vacant, that Flora realised her bereavement, and the well-spring of grief gushed forth. But the faithful Claudius had already made preparations for her quitting the house, as was ever the custom with the Romans on the demise of a near relation ; and in this case everything seemed to concur towards the fulfilment of Siona's expressed wish, that her words of parting farewell and encouragement should be borne to Laurentius in his last hour. That desire was also uppermost in the mind of Flora ; so that, when her female attendants brought her notice that all was ready for her journey, and it only remained for her to decide where she wished to retire during her mother's obsequies, she answered immediately : "To our house on the Mount Aventine, without delay".

"Claudius awaits you, dear lady, with his *cisium* ; he is at the door."

"Oh, how thankful I am," she replied ; "you are all so thoughtful, that in my great sorrow I feel there are few masters who possess such slaves."

"Or rather there are few masters to compare with those we have had the happiness of serving. God speed our good mistress, and may she return to us soon."

This wish was echoed by all the household in hushed tones, as they watched the vehicle till it was out of sight.

Claudius was a good driver, and the road to Rome being down hill all the way, they reached their destination in time to meet the funeral procession of the Via Urbana, which was headed by Laurentius himself, on his way to martyrdom. The sun was at its zenith; the hour of noon had been chosen as the most private for the execution; for no Roman would venture out in the mid-day heat. And yet the brave youth, condemned to such an unheard-of torment, had many to look on him. His brethren in the faith, the poor to whom he had proved a faithful almoner, would not desert him; they drew round his last battle-field, to pray for victory. He reached the enclosed spot appointed for his death. The Præfect sat on an elevated chair; on one side of him was a tripod, placed before a pagan divinity, and, at the distance of a few steps, a layer of charcoal and small wood, disposed in an oblong square, over which was placed one of those small, very low iron bedsteads, composed of bars crossed, and standing on six little feet, such as we see them in Etruscan tombs.

Laurentius stood before his judge, erect and arrayed in his deacon's robes; for, although the law obliged sufferers to wear the garb of the pagan god in whose honour they were immolated, Laurentius was descended from a family so much respected in Rome, that the humiliating formality was dispensed with in his favour. The burning sun beat on his uncovered head, but he

wincing not; and, being interrogated, he refused his names. They called upon him once more to offer some incense on the burning tripod. "I see no fire here," he answered; "it is eclipsed in the sun's rays, even as your false gods sink into nothing before the majesty of mine."

And there was a humorous smile on his lips—strange, flickering spark of the Attic wit which characterised him.

Again they called upon him a second and a third time.

"Methinks, noble Præfect, you lose your time and exhaust the patience of these worthy men, my executioners. Mark how their brows are bedewed with moisture; it were better they did their business quickly, for it is hot work at this time of day."

Again this strange-timed pleasantry, when the stoutest hearts felt pity for their victim.

Rude hands were laid on him, and they proceeded to unrobe him; he himself took off his dalmatic, and laid it, carefully folded, on the ground, for he knew his brethren would redeem that pledge. His eye ran over the assembly, recognising here and there many a Christian sign of greeting; suddenly his cheek, flushed till then with the excitement of triumph, grew pale, and his eyes moistened, as he met the steadfast gaze of a modest girl-face, fixed on him with an expression of unspeakable woe. An evident struggle went on within him, but it was short; once more he raised his voice, but this time in a subdued tone:

"Præfect," he said, "I accept the death assigned to

me in defence of my faith ; not a murmur shall escape my lips, but grant me this one only favour : let me not die unclothed as a slave ; if it be not permitted to wear a Roman *toga* when submitting to an ignominious death, allow me, at least, to retain the under vesture which cannot diminish my sufferings."

They respected the dying request of the martyr ; and he went his way, clothed in his long, white, woollen under-garment ; and he laid himself down on that gridiron of iron bars, and stretched out his arms, even as his Master had stretched out His on the cross, and like Him he prayed for his murderers, commended his soul to God, and thought of those dear, loving eyes that were gazing at him from the crowd. "I am ready !" he cried, raising his voice ; and torches were applied to the combustible materials beneath him. A dense smoke arose, divided here and there by the flames that shot upwards, and from the midst of them came a living sound : it was the voice of the martyr, who was praying. And then, whether with a view to gratify the thirst for blood, known to be so strong in the people, or perhaps in order to increase the victim's torments by bringing eye-witnesses to revile him, the serried ranks of the soldiers guarding the enclosed space were broken through, and the crowd from without came pouring in and stood round him at the distance of a few feet. The smoke dispelled, the coals glowed ; he lay exposed to view ! But, oh God ! was it indeed he ? The fire was smothered and slow ; its horrible progress could only be divined by the aspect of the hands, which the convulsive

pain had turned in their sockets ; the skin shrunk, then was rent asunder, and the flesh burned with a crackling sound, and the human marrow poured forth on the coals below and fed them.

The limbs were not yet distorted, for they were chained down to the iron bars, and the under side alone was slowly consuming ; soon the fire communicated its glow to the chains, which fastened like burning serpents on the writhing limbs, and gnawed visibly into the bone ; then large gaps opened here and there—inflamed, bleeding, festering wounds ; the lookers-on sickened at the sight, and almost all fled in horror. Only two remained by the martyr's side, Claudius and Flora, and they feared not, for their eyes were opened.

They saw, sitting at the head of Laurentius, an Angel of the Lord, fanning him with immaculate wings, and breathing sweet words of promise ; and as he fanned the flames withdrew, they did not approach the place where he sat, and the head of the martyr remained unscathed in that huge fire ; and although his locks fell, singed, on the burning coals, and the hot iron stamped a circlet on his brow, yet his beauty was scarcely altered, the expression of his eyes remained the same, now they rested on those two faithful ones. Flora, too, felt refreshed by the Angel's holy wings ; where she stood there was no smell of human sacrifice, but a sweet breath emitted by the Guardian Spirit, like the odour of flowers in spring. She delivered her mother's dying message to the sufferer, and he said : "She is nigh ! Pray aloud for me—you are helping me".

She tried hard to comply with his wish, till her voice failed her, and the martyr bid her withdraw; but, before she went, she knelt down before the fiery sacrifice, drew from the coals beneath some embers imbued with her brother's blood. Claudius received them in a small vessel, and they bore them away.

Laurentius lingered on, the hot sun glared down on that iniquity, while the pure blood, smoking on the embers, arose before the Lord. Was it imploring vengeance or mercy?

The executioners were weary; they renewed the fire, hoping to accelerate their work, but the martyr lived still, supported by an invisible agency, and presently his voice was heard, as strong as when he had first spoken to the Præfect, and there was still a touch of pleasantry in his words: "This side is done enough; turn and eat". Some shuddered, and one, more humane than the rest, declared the victim had suffered enough, and it were needless to torture him more; so, taking up the huge pincers, he gently unriveted the fetters. In doing so his eyes were transfixed, for he, too, saw an Angel sitting in the midst of the flames, and fanning the martyr, and he no longer dared to approach. When his companions took up the half-roasted body to turn it round, the back was charred, the limbs shrivelled, the muscles contracted, so that the mangled frame could no longer be stretched out. The sweet face was still upturned, the loving eyes searched the depths of that soldier's soul, and he fell prostrate, crying out: "Laurentius, obtain my pardon from thy God, for I believe!"

The martyr spoke no more, for his sufferings were at their height; one side was already dead, but the delicate tissue of nerves spread on the upper part of the body their burning ramification of pain, and, as sparks circulate through, and die out of, an ignited piece of wood, so one could see all over that quivering frame, the action of each muscle, as it trembled under the drawn skin, then burst the epidermis, and displayed beneath the living flesh. Each vein swelled in turn, as the inflamed blood ran through it for the last time, then oozed out from the gaping wounds, and so each part grew helpless and died in its turn, while life still held its earthly tenement.

Though speechless, the martyr's look, unmistakable in its expression, conveyed to the repentant soldier a promise of pardon, and the man trusted to that dying unspoken word. He stooped over his victim, applying water to his lips, and, wishing to bear away with him a pledge of pardon and a memorial of that hour, he seized upon the iron chains which he had loosened. They burned under his touch, but he winced not, pressed them to his forehead and breast, participating thus, by desire, in the fiery baptism he had witnessed. He went his way, and but a few days elapsed before he joined the martyr in his Heavenly Father's Kingdom, the first-fruits of a sacrifice which is never offered in vain; and the Christians blessed him for the chains he brought them, steeped in their brother's blood, which are honoured to this day in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina, in Rome.

And then, when the martyr saw himself alone with his God—for the persecutors, weary with watching him, had left him to his fate, and his brethren prayed around him at a little distance—he felt a momentary return of life before his spirit fled away; he raised his voice, hollow and echoless now as the sound of water trickling from the bed of a river that has dried up, and he said: “Master, it is time! take me to Thee”; and from that poor, charred frame there issued a cry, loud and triumphant, as of a victor entering into glory. The earth around shook with the powerful sound, and those who were at a distance knew that the incense of the burning holocaust had reached the throne of the Lamb of God that was slain!

The executioners did not return to gaze on their horrid work. The martyr was left to the care of his brethren; they came, bringing with them a marble slab whereon the mangled remains might be decently composed to rest, but many shrank from the painful office of removing the poor body from the iron on which it had been consumed to death. Claudius, kneeling and weeping bitterly, stretched out his arms to receive the precious burthen, and gently, as he had often raised his young master in childhood, he now laid him on the slab, and the blood oozed out as the Christians washed him. Verily, God willed that the relics of that young hero should be honoured, for that marble table has been preserved to this day in the Basilica of “San Lorenzo fuori le mura”. Those blood-stained marks cry to Heaven still, vivid and warm with the sacrifice of that hour.

When the men had done their work, anointing and bandaging the body, the female part of the congregation drew near. Flora poured perfumes on his yet undisfigured head; she prayed long and fervently by him. While the Christians were thus engaged a slave, the same who had already been despatched on the part of Hippolytus, son of the centurion, to the family at Aricia, now came to mingle in the pious throng. Recognising Claudius and Flora, he informed them quietly that he was again the bearer of a message from his master. The body was left to the Christians to inter as they wished, and they had better make haste lest the permission should be revoked. They gratefully accepted the offer, wrapped the body in a new linen sheet, even as was done in the burial of Christ, clothed it in the dalmatic Laurentius had worn in life, then bore him away to a safe place till they could bury him with solemnity; they collected all the coals, secured the bed of iron too, and, when all these duties had been lovingly fulfilled: "Let me now take you to your house on Mount Aventine, my dear young mistress," said Claudius; "you require retirement and prayer to recover from the scenes of this day. As for me, I could die in peace now that it has been granted me to do my duty to your heroic brother to the end, and with my own eyes to witness his glorious martyrdom."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THERE is often a pleasant sensation imparted by the reaction of the atmosphere after a summer storm. The clouds, so lately charged with electricity, have rained down their anger, leaving on the earth a welcome moisture, and on each tree drops sparkling in the sunshine, such as we are wont to see in autumn on the falling leaves, as if tears shed by Nature over her dying beauty. In the south particularly the very colour of the sky undergoes a change ; it has no longer that sapphire tint of the ether, steeped in the sun's rays ; it grows of a darker blue, and the sunlight, as it dances through the trees, casts on the ground rays of melancholy cheerfulness, like joy passing through a prison window ; the branches are vibrating to a wind that utters sighs of gentle sorrow, and the shadows grow longer, as if the evening of life were approaching.

Again we find Claudius in the garden of his master's house on Mount Aventine, engaged in tying up flowers, and clipping the overgrown box trees into fantastic shapes. His attention was arrested by one huge, ungainly bush, which the pruning scissors had never approached. He walked round it several times, wondering what he could make of it. At length the wide-spreading branches on one side and small tough

knob on the other suggested a new idea, which so pleased him, that he got a huge knife, and set to work with vigour.

He had been engaged in this occupation for some time, when a jet of water from the central fountain in the garden, alighting suddenly on his head, made him start and look round with surprise. A child's laugh rang merrily in the enclosure, and his young mistress Flora, attired in mourning robes, came towards him with a little girl in her arms.

"You must forgive her, Claudius," she said; "I do not think she was aware of what she was doing, when she asked me to lift her to the fountain, and let her turn the cock. See, she is herself covered with spray, and claps her hands most undutifully at the sight of the mischief she has done!"

"Little Helena," exclaimed the delighted grandfather, "how strong you have become!"

There was a porphyry tripod in the centre of the garden, forming a beautiful *jet d'eau*; a concealed tube, passed through one of the hollow supports, could, by a secret contrivance, emit a sudden and profuse shower when least expected. Waterworks were a favourite amusement with the old Romans, who loved to display them in all their pleasure-grounds.

"Claudius," observed the young woman, with a melancholy smile, "how easily you return to your old pursuits!"

"Yes, dear lady, I did not intend to spend so much time over this; I only came out to examine the trees

previous to putting the place in order, and, with my old instinct of a gardener, I set to turn this unsightly stump into the shape of a peacock."

Again the child burst into a merry peal of laughter, and clapped her hands.

"What, Helena, do you understand me so well as that? Lady Flora, this little one reminds me strongly of you; like her, you used to come and examine my handiwork, expressing your approbation or the contrary."

"I was ever a spoilt child, good Claudius. I have met with friends all my life long, and even now that our hearth is desolate, and that I wish to quit this house, how kindly my relations have come forward to take it off my hands. Under the circumstances, I could never have expected such good feeling—not a word of reproach about my religion, which, in their eyes, has blighted all the hopes of the family."

"God will reward them in His own good time, dear mistress, doubt it not. Meanwhile, it is a duty to dispose of all your worldly possessions to the best advantage. Concordia and I have divided the work between us, so that you shall only have to superintend our arrangements."

"Oh, you are a good man of business, and my dear old nurse is an excellent housekeeper. I wish to dispose of all that can be sold in favour of the Christian poor, reserving only what is necessary for my personal support. I need not tell you that a sum has been already laid out at interest, to accumulate for little

Helena ; this was done by my mother's orders some months ago."

"And you wonder, lady, at my devotion in your service, when you show so much generosity to me and mine. Be prudent ; do not forget that you are going to live under the roof of friends, disinterested, it is true, but not over rich, and you will have to contribute towards the general housekeeping."

"Strange to say, Claudius, that has been provided for by one of those circumstances which we love to look upon as ordained by our heavenly Father. My cousin, who offered to purchase this house, has this very day sent me a message to this effect : he finds that he has not sufficient ready money to close the bargain, and offers me a small estate he owns in Etruria, which he thinks will pay the balance, as it is well cultivated and very productive. What pleases me is that this identical piece of land borders on Volumnia's property, and it will be such a suitable gift to present her with."

"Oh, then, accept at once, lady, if you have not already done so."

"Do you think I would conclude any pecuniary affair without consulting you ? You know you are my man of business. What is that ?" she observed wonderingly, as an unusual noise was heard at the outer door. "What can be the matter ? Will you look after the porter, Claudius ? During the lifetime of my honoured parents our slaves were always remarked for their good behaviour and decorum ; I wish the same order and regularity to be preserved as long as I reside here."

He left his work and went in the direction required of him, returning almost immediately with evident signs of preturbation in his manner. "A visitor has presented himself at the gate," he explained, "and one so unexpected that the *janitor* refused him admittance, so that it was fortunate I arrived in time to prevent a most uncourteous proceeding. The young and noble Hippolytus, to whom your family have been more than once indebted for signal services, craves now an interview with you. He apologises for intruding on your solitude in this your season of mourning, and if you cannot receive him, he begs to see Concordia, to whom he can confide the weighty communication he has to make."

"Oh, Claudius, why did you not introduce him at once? After all that my poor brother did for him before his death, and the kindness Hippolytus showed us in our dreadful trial, God forbid that he should be repulsed as a stranger from our doors. Let Concordia come to present her respects to her old master, and do you be present too, good Claudius. Go now, and ask our visitor to join us here."

So saying, she let him precede her, and followed slowly to meet Hippolytus, so as to do away with the first unpleasant reception he had met with from the porter, for which she now apologised.

"It was a mistake, lady Flora, which I readily understood. Nothing would have induced me to call upon you so soon after your bereavement, were it not an imperative duty on my part to bid you farewell, and to solicit the prayers of your household."

"Are you going to join your father at the wars?" asked Flora. "Will you take a seat here?" she added, pointing to the grass plot near the fountain which she had just left; "the weather is so oppressive within doors."

"Oh, yes, with pleasure; I can observe the flight of time to advantage here," he answered, fixing his eyes on a little bronze figure which surmounted the fountain, and, holding a tiny wand, pointed out regularly the hours as they passed, marked on a column. "That small statue has seen many changes," he observed, "in its motionless attitude."

"Yes," replied Flora, "it has counted the golden hours of my childhood; but now life has become to me, like our own Via Appia, marked at each stage by a new tomb. I feel as if I had died a fresh death with each of the dear ones I have lost."

"There is, indeed," observed Hippolytus, "a double martyrdom for some of us—our own, and the participation in the sufferings of others. You have gone through the latter, and oh, how bravely! A few days ago"—he stopped and shuddered, unwilling to recall the remembrance of Laurentius' death, but Flora said calmly:

"That scene is always before me; do not fear to speak of my saintly brother. Saintly indeed he was; no one knew his worth more than I did. I loved him from childhood as one far superior to me, though younger by a few years. I could not understand the nature of his influence over me; it was purifying,

ennobling. I was proud of being his friend ; he was destined to be the stepping-stone between me and my Unknown God ; and as soon as he had unveiled Him to me, he became to me one of those angels that minister before the Eternal Throne. Ah ! his was no common lot, his combat no easy victory, his crown is no passing reward ! ”

Hippolytus looked up to the bright canopy of Heaven above, and remained lost in thought. No one seemed inclined to break the silence which had fallen over the little circle, but the child Helena, who, weary at not being noticed, let go Flora’s hand, and walked over to the young soldier, first examined his sword, then raised her hand to his helmet.

“ Your granddaughter has soldierly instincts,” observed Hippolytus, addressing Claudius, who was gazing at her with delight.

“ She inherits them from her father,” was the pleased reply.

“ May she be called upon to fight in the service of a Heavenly King,” pursued the young man, reverently imprinting the sign of the cross on her forehead.

“ Well,” enquired Flora, “ if it be not intruding on higher subjects of conversation, may I ask what takes you away from Rome so suddenly ? ”

“ Oh, lady, I am in full uniform, as you perceive ; as a soldier girds himself before he goes to battle, so am I going to my last combat. I have long borne the insignia of a worldly master ; I cast them aside now, for the badge of the glorious servitude of Our God. In

a word, dear friends, I have been warned that orders have been sent out to seize me, for I was watched going to visit Laurentius in his prison, remarked when I stood near the tribunal and mingled with the spectators of his death; spies followed me to the Christian assemblies and betrayed me."

"We are always exhorted not to expose ourselves to danger. Could you not escape while it is yet time?"

"A Roman soldier dies at his post, and, besides, I am too well known. I am happy, very happy, at being thus marked out—I who am but a Christian of a few days' standing. I do not regret life; but oh! my dear father will think that, in his absence, I dishonoured his home. He will say that, while he went forth with our Emperor to fight the enemies of our country, I introduced new gods at his hearth, an unknown creed in his household. Oh, father, father! thy reproaches will penetrate my tomb, when thou, brave soldier of the republic, wilt find thy house violated, thy name dishonoured, thy son branded as a public criminal. Ignominy to a Roman centurion is a gnawing sorrow that never dies!"

Hippolytus was quite unmanned, and shaded his eyes with his hands as if to dispel the vision his filial affection had thus conjured up. Flora made a sign to Concordia, who had been standing in the background, to come forward. She did so, and, with the respectful familiarity of an old nurse, she addressed the young soldier in terms alike of encouragement and energy. Her language, indeed, would have seemed above her position, were it not that Christians of all classes were

so continually brought face to face with great and noble deeds, as to give a high tone to every thought they uttered.

“Allow me to remind you, my dear young master, that you serve One Whose rewards are proportioned to your sacrifice. He has a right to the whole of our service ; and He Himself gave the lesson to His disciples : ‘ When you shall have done all these things, look upon yourselves as unprofitable servants ’.”

“And those to whom that word was spoken, had they sacrificed an aged father as I am called upon to do ?”

“God gave up His Only Begotten Son, Who died as a malefactor on the Cross between two thieves ; and the anguish of that God-Man was so great in His hour of dereliction, that He raised up His voice, exclaiming : ‘ My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me ’ ?”

“Our Father, Who art in Heaven, forgive me that I have murmured.”

All were visibly moved at this humble acknowledgment of a passing weakness, and Claudius, who had till then been silent, now chimed in.

“When your sacrifice shall be accomplished, noble Hippolytus, and you look down from above on the life you have cast away for God, then, if a regret can enter the heart of the beatified, you will experience sorrow at not having brought to the sacrifice a more willing victim.”

“Even perhaps,” pursued the young man, roused by the accents of one whom he knew to have fought for his country—“even, as when the dying soldier, looking back on a well-spent life, laments that his victories have not

been more numerous, mourns that he has not done more to be recorded in the annals of posterity."

"Even so!"

"Then, oh, my God, Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, forgive the blindness of one who, but lately emerged from the night of paganism, can hardly yet discern Thy noon-day brightness. Not only do I accept martyrdom, but I hail it as the gift of Thy love; not only do I desire death for Thy sake, but a death, slow, violent, and painful, such as may perpetuate my name among my martyred brethren. Yet, let not vainglory have any part in this my desire. If I be willing to suffer a double sacrifice, 'tis that I offer it, first for Thy glory, and next for the salvation of my father's soul."

"My God! I thank Thee," exclaimed Flora; "this is the sweetest joy I have known for long. Yes, I thank God, Hippolytus, that you prove true to your calling to the last, for if *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, how glorious it is to unite the fervour of a Christian with the heroism of a soldier! Verily, like the Lacedemonian youths called out to defend the frontier of their country, you will remain faithful to the end, with all your companions dead around you. Go then, add your name to the glorious phalanx, strew the earth with your mangled remains, you are but raising a monument to your glory before God and before men. From the mound of earth cast on your soldier's grave, a voice shall proclaim the defender of the Thermopylæ of Christianity, and bid the stranger go tell the world of those who died for God and for His holy laws!"

He stood up at her bidding, fired with her enthusiasm, elated, triumphant. "I am ready!" he said; "we part as we have met, like children of the saints, whose hopes are fixed above."

So saying, he rose to depart, but was detained by Flora's suggesting, "There is one offer I would make to you, Hippolytus. I think it will be a comfort to you to have Concordia near you in this time of trial; she is, besides, so experienced a housekeeper, that in the absence of your father she is the very person to keep everything in order."

"Oh, lady, this is an unheard-of favour. Her truly Christian spirit will be a powerful support to me, and she is already known to our slaves, who all look up to her with respect. But I cannot deprive you of her services, and moreover I should not like to draw her into the dangers to which I am myself exposed."

"Oh, do not say that," broke in Concordia; "my dear mistress' wishes are commands to me, and in this circumstance they meet the fondest desires of my heart. I should be too happy to be of any use to my young master, and to lay down my life for him would be a reward above my merits."

"Then go, Concordia," interposed Flora, "as soon as you can get ready. Nay, do not thank me, Hippolytus, it is I who have ever been indebted to you, as far back as the night you kept watch by my dear father's body."

During their conversation the short Italian twilight had come to a close; there was no moon up that night, but the stars appeared almost simultaneously in the dark

sky ; fitful gleams of light seemed to flit over the faces of those Christian friends, the reflection of brilliant meteors in the sky. From one bright constellation in particular, stars seemed to be detached and to fall gracefully in a curve towards the earth, but without reaching it, like messengers of light sinking under the weight of a warning too weighty to be revealed.

“Have you ever seen this before ?” asked Hippolytus, “is it an omen, think you ?”

“To us who are blessed with the gift of faith the stars bear but one omen. They tell us the glory of Him Who made them and pronounced them good, for they reveal His handiwork. Were I to listen to the voice of my own heart I should think them to be bearers of messages from those who, already in glory, bid us go to share their triumph. With what impetus they seek their centre ! how the burning love they bear within them carries them on to the end of their course, and then they consume away, like those who feel within them a sacred fire, too great for mortal to bear.”

“And thus it was with Laurentius,” pursued Hippolytus ; “like a meteor through the sky, fleeting but brilliant, he shone for others, casting before and after him on his path a light which will survive him long. Blessed youth, methinks those stars we gaze upon are falling compassionately on the earth, like angels’ tears shed over his early doom, and bearing with them a strange significance ! . . . May they not be the torches of his funeral lit in Heaven, or the sparks of his glorious pyre, which have ascended thither from earth ?”

“Less for him than for us, Hippolytus, is it permitted to us to see him thus honoured : he gave up into the hands of his Maker an angelic soul in a mortal^{er} body. Yet, he did not live for this generation only ; each succeeding year (for my brother’s fame will last, according as my mother foretold) men will weep over Laurentius’ early, dreadful death ; and, seeing their pity imaged in the skies, they will watch on this night for the falling stars, calling them ‘ Laurentius’ fiery tears ’ ! * And now, good Hippolytus, farewell ; Concordia will be with you to-morrow ; we hardly know whether we have many morrows to look forward to, but you are on your way to a great battle-field, where defeat is unknown, where God registers above the names of the conquerors, and the chaplets of victory are woven for them by angels’ hands.”

They parted—to meet no more.

* The shooting stars which appear every year about the 10th August are called “St. Lawrence’s fiery tears” in Italy and some other countries.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TWO days later, a banquet was served to the poor in the Via Urbana, in the house of Hippolytus, son of the centurion. Concordia had made all due preparations, and conducted the modest feast in the most orderly manner; alms were distributed among the guests at the close of the repast, which was necessarily of short duration, for every one knew danger was suspended over that house. The steward, a Christian himself, passing once more through the ranks of the poor brethren, bid them, in a low voice, to disperse. "And for the charity done you this day by the young lord of the house," he said, "pray fervently for him and his. Pray! for the storm is lowering and the tempest is at hand! Go to your homes and persevere in prayer, till you hear that Hippolytus is with the blessed."

They obeyed, and went their way quietly; but all murmured a word of blessing on that threshold as they crossed it, and that word prospered.

The household remained alone. Concordia adorned a private oratory, where her young master had expressed his desire to await his doom in prayer.

"How pleasant and sweet it would be to lie here after death!" said Hippolytus cheerfully, and angels registered the half-spoken wish, which was fulfilled later. A sen-

sation of great peace and even joy seemed to steal over all there assembled, as the manly voice of the young soldier pronounced aloud that Creed which, composed by the Apostles, had become the Christians' rule of faith—fit password for him who was so soon to appear before his God. All responded; they believed in the communion of saints, in the resurrection of the dead, in life everlasting. Amen. In the short silence that ensued a deep emotion was visible in the slaves, gathered together for the last time round their master, in whom Christianity had so softened down the pride of birth, that the distinction of ranks, so marked in Rome, had long been levelled between them, and their love had grown as their fear of him decreased. Again he spoke, exhorting them to be faithful, telling them that if he left them, One Master in Heaven would remain, and they must await His coming, for "Blessed is the servant who, when his Lord cometh, even at the second or third hour, shall be found watching".

And with them, verily, it was so! The hours grew into the night, yet interrupted not their pious vigil: as time passed a faint hope began to dawn that that hearth would be respected or forgotten, when, as the water-clock marked midnight, a loud knocking was heard without, and voices claimed admittance in an authoritative tone.

Hippolytus awaited firmly the messengers of the law who asked for him, and all those of his house who would proclaim themselves Christians.

Not one withdrew from the declaration. All were ordered to be taken outside the Porta Tiburtina, and

there put to death ; but Concordia, who was observed to pass from one to another, piously encouraging them to be faithful to the end, was purposely separated from the rest, and sentence was passed on her without delay : she was scourged to death with whips, weighted with lead.

All answered aloud to the appeal save one. "He was a Briton," he declared ; "the edict had no force on those of his nation ; let them consult their list : his name was not there !" He claimed the inviolability of a guest, and they were obliged to respect his claim.

Hippolytus was conveyed to the same prison where Laurentius had passed the last night of his captivity—he could kneel at the same font where, in that dark vault, he had received those saving waters which purified his soul—he might learn over again, in that solitude, the lessons he had imbibed from Laurentius.

Where were Concordia and the other slaves ? They could not, in that hour of trial, surround their young master, but they persevered in prayer for him and for each other.

At early dawn he was dragged out to a mock judgment, his sentence was passed, and, lest the troops that had served under him should arise to free and avenge him, it was decreed that only a few hours must elapse between his condemnation and execution.

With a heavy heart the faithful Claudius, who clung to every one connected with his old masters, had followed Hippolytus to the tribunal, and there heard his iniquitous sentence. Finding it impossible to approach

the young martyr, he turned his steps to Mount Aventine.

Entering gently the house, of which he had a private key, he was accosted by one of the female slaves, who told him her mistress had sat up all night, watching anxiously for his return, and now, worn out with fatigue, she had fallen asleep in an easy chair near Helena's little cot. He thought it better to let her rest, but the slave could not conceal the fact of Claudius' much-wished-for return : she went to apprise Flora, who came immediately to meet him.

She was alarmed as she met his gaze. Was it indeed Claudius, so haggard, fierce-looking, his eye flashing with indignation ?

"I would rather you had slept on," he exclaimed, "rather than see God's sun light up this day."

"I understand : you mean he has been apprehended ; but when will they judge him ?"

"Sentence has already been passed upon him ; Rome has pronounced it, and calls herself a civilised nation !"

"What is it ? Nothing can be more dreadful than what we have already witnessed."

"Yet this is atrocious. The gentle, high-minded youth is condemned by a cruel irony to the death of his namesake in the fables. Like the son of Theseus, Hippolytus is to be torn by wild horses."

Flora swooned away in the arms of her female attendant, who, seeing Claudius much pained at the effect of his communication, said : "Do not be alarmed ; our dear mistress is exhausted by the sleepless night she has

passed, but she will soon recover. Call Simplicia to my assistance, and we shall take care of her. Better for her to remain thus, returning consciousness will be so painful !”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, when the gaolers went to arouse Hippolytus, they found him kneeling in prayer. He was awaiting the coming of his Lord ; like the good and faithful servant, he was watching. He passed out from his prison walls with his eyes cast down. What cared he to look on the Rome that spurned him ? He held out his hands to be manacled, recommending his soul to One Who had died on the gibbet like a malefactor.

“ I am ready !” he cried ; “ if any remains be found of Hippolytus, lay them in a decent grave.”

When the undisciplined horses were brought to the Esquiline hill, the executioners themselves recoiled at the sound of their fierce neighing, and implored the young hero to submit to the formality, at least, of burning incense to the idols ; but he defied their false gods, and bid them do their worst. No one dared touch him, brave, noble, beloved as he was. He laid himself down on the ground, with outstretched arms, as the Victim on Calvary had done before him, and the untamed steeds looked down, as if in pity, on the unwonted sight. They scorned to hurt him as he lay thus at their mercy ; but men, more cruel than they, gave the word, and then to each of the four horses was bound either an arm or a foot of that unfortunate young man.

He was raised to their height, and leather thongs supported him, a living weight, balanced between them. A little while he remained thus, while the horses were being unfastened; a little while his lips moved, his uplifted eyes gazing upon Heaven, resting as it were till his torture began.

Hark! what is that yell, less of men than of demons? The horses are set free, with a cutting lash. The temporary support which had upheld Hippolytus falls. A fearful jerk brings the horses together, then they set off. On, on go the foremost; but those placed behind them, untamed, furious against their living burthen—terrified, moreover, at the sight of that human head, which strikes against the pavement, strive vainly to get loose; they are impelled onwards. There is a wonderful strength in the human instinct of self-preservation. The victim clutches with his bound hands the shaggy hides of his tormentors; he draws them towards him; his muscles are still vigorous; he can raise his head, and leans it on one of the horses to his right; for a moment he is relieved. But the animal casts him off; he holds on still, and, although his head falls back, he has still strength to keep it from the ground. Brought too near their companions in the front, the animals in the rear plunge forward, drive their hoofs into their sides, but in vain! They are all strongly bound to the martyr; foam curdles at their mouths, they turn round upon him, he feels their fiery breath, their sides reeking with nauseous moisture, and still . . . on—on! at every step a pang through his vigorous young frame, stretched on

this living rack of torture. He opens his eyes; "Is Heaven near? it seems to be on fire!"

It was noon, and the sun looked down on that awful scene just as it had cast its blazing light on the torments of Laurentius; but oh! he had friends near him; Hippolytus is alone! His thongs are burning, his brain reels; each contact with the hard ground makes him feel as if he were being stoned to death. Oh, that it had been so! And now he loses consciousness and can see no more. 'Twas but a short respite! The horses' hoofs clatter on in his dream; now they are on a long, lonely road; they burn with thirst; they plunge. From the gashes in his body blood streams to the ground; one of the steeds tries to lap it up with his swollen tongue, the others bound in another direction; there is a fierce struggle, then a crash, then a pain, so excruciating that it can be felt but once in a lifetime. It must either produce death or arouse from it. With the poor victim it did the latter. Hippolytus opens his dying eyes and sees, wrenched from its socket, fastened still by thongs, torn from his bleeding side, his living arm! Another moment and the horses, furious, maddened, have done their work; one sinks to the ground, the others flee. The fragments of a mangled corpse are strewed on the roadside, and remain there till nightfall.

Then, when Rome slept in her iniquitous rest, regardless of the pure blood she had shed, which rose before God, crying aloud for vengeance, there appeared on that road, in the darkness of the night, men and women—tra-

vellers, they seemed, for they bore staves as for a journey, and lanthorns wherewith to guide their steps. Ever and anon they stopped and communed together; there were two, a man and a veiled female, who seemed to guide the rest. . . . Suddenly they discerned a dark mass on the road; they drew near, bent over it, and the silence of the night was broken by a shriek so piercing that the desolate Campagna re-echoed it like a wail.

It was the veiled woman who had recognised the dead horse that lay in the dust, and, still fastened to its reeking sides, something which could hardly have been called human were it not for a youthful head clotted with gore, but with lineaments still visible to the discerning eye of the horror-stricken Flora.

“But this is only a part of him, Claudius,” she said; “seek, seek, for his mangled remains. Dear brethren, continue your search, let not the birds of the air feast on what was once Hippolytus, our martyred brother in the Lord. Offer to the poor, who are not Christians, gold for each fragment they find and deliver to you; this body, which has been the temple of the Holy Ghost, is a priceless treasure, to be redeemed at any cost. We must continue our search until all we can possibly find be collected, so that the martyr’s relics may lie in a consecrated grave.”

All the poor of the Christian Church entered into Flora’s feelings with the devotion which the faithful have ever borne to relics. The very blood of Hippolytus, which had left traces on the dust of the road-

side, was collected, and, far more carefully than calcined bones are gathered up from the funeral pyre, were his precious remains sought for and placed side by side. And when matrons' hands had laid out the shattered corpse of the young hero, and purified his mortal remains, he was buried, as it is recorded in the Acts of his martyrdom, *unaque cum reliquis a Justino presbytero ad agrum Veranum sepultus est*, with the rest—that is, with his own slaves, who lay dead outside the Porta Tiburtina. Later on, when the days of persecution had passed away, the relics of that young soldier-martyr were enclosed in a waxen effigy, clothed in a soldier's garb, and conveyed to that oratory where he had last prayed, and where he sleeps to the present day in a chapel raised over the spot in the Via Urbana.

CHAPTER XL.

A YEAR passed away, during which Rome saw her frontiers invaded by more than one enemy. The Franks, a new confederacy, menaced Gaul by their united forces. The Suevi, the most renowned of their tribes, had coalesced into a great and permanent nation ; they took the name of Allmen to denote their various lineage. During the reign of Alexander Severus they had hovered long on the frontiers of the Empire, which they dared not enter, being alarmed by his preparations against them ; but at the death of Decius they advanced as far as Ravenna and displayed themselves almost in sight of Rome. At that time both Emperors were absent ; the senators drew out the Prætorian guard, and raised an army. The Germans withdrew, but laden with spoil.

Gallienus, in order to protect Italy, had married Pipa, daughter of the king of the Marcomanni.

The Goths conquered the Crimea, and, leaving the coast of Circassia, sailed before Pitymus, the limits of the Roman province ; they were repulsed, but destroyed the city. They arrived at Trebizond, and took it.

The new sovereigns of Persia, Artaxerxes and his son Sapor, had triumphed over Arsaces. Chosroes, King of Armenia, was assassinated by the enemies of Sapor ;

the satraps implored the protection of Rome in favour of Tiridates, the rightful heir. But he was an infant ; and Sapor, at the head of an irresistible force, spread devastation on either side of the Euphrates. Valerian, though advanced in years, marched in person to defend the East ; he passed the Euphrates, met the Persians near Edessa, and was taken prisoner. He had reposed confidence in Macrianus, his Prætorian Præfect, who rendered his master formidable only to his oppressed subjects, and contemptible to the enemies of Rome, and who betrayed him into a situation where valour was of no avail. Valerian offered money to purchase a retreat, but was obliged to submit to a conference with the Persian ; he was made prisoner and his troops laid down their arms.

There are strange coincidences at times, in history as well as in the life of individuals. In the same country where Valerian had, with reluctance, accepted the imperial purple, he was deprived of it by a victorious enemy. Devoted to the gods of Persia, he had sacrificed to them his interior convictions, and, in order to gratify the *magi*, passed an edict of persecution against the Christians. The very gods of Persia seemed to have turned against him ; and never was fall so humiliating, never prisoner's fate more galling than that experienced by Valerian.

And thus a year had passed over the throne, the altar, and the domestic hearth.

Flora had, according to her dying mother's suggestion, paid a visit of some months to her friend Volumnia in

Etruria, during which time the memory of the events with which she was connected faded away, in great measure, from the minds of the volatile *plebs Romæ*, and she could safely return to her much-loved native soil. She had reserved to herself the family property of Aricia, which she destined ultimately to leave to Helena ; it is here we find her on her return from Etruria.

It was a melancholy pleasure for her to pace again the despoiled *atrium*, where the images of her ancestors had occupied the walls for so long ; to linger in each room by turns, and live over again that portion of her childhood which she had spent there ; to go into the old over-grown garden, examine its weedy beds, its spoiled *ambulationes*, its tangled bowers, where so often as a little girl she had loved to hide, in order to be called out by her mother's voice.

She went to sit near the wall, whence she had so often looked out on distant Rome, and wondered how, when so much was changed in her own life, all was unaltered there. Her fancy conjured up a picture of the well-known edifices of the Eternal City, too far removed to be discernible, even in that clear atmosphere. She thought of the *Arx*, standing out against the angry sky, where summer clouds showed their silvery lining, prophetic of a storm. Near that citadel of Rome would glitter the gold-roofed temple of Jupiter Capitolinus ; further on, the Coliseum, where so many of her brethren had fallen. The Forum of Nero, destroyed in execration of his name, spread out like a great barren waste, which it was supposed could never more

be filled; for who then could foresee that a great shrine, the centre of all Christendom, would rise one day over the fisherman's tomb? "*Et sepulchrum ejus erit gloriosum.*"

The horizon grew from azure to dark blue, then to iron grey, and the peals of distant thunder came, echoed by the surrounding hills; still Flora lingered on, thinking of the many pages of her domestic life which had been unrolled here—of that very day, now so far distant, when her mother announced to her a little brother was coming to share their home, to whom it would be her duty to attend. Had she fulfilled that trust? Yea, verily! A child came running towards her, just as she herself on that day had run to her mother, plunged in reverie. Strange! at the distance of so many years, Helena's little feet bounded on the pebbles as if the Flora of old existed still; the little thing showed signs of a growing intelligence, which her loving teacher and her grandfather developed by watchful care.

"How long you have been away," she cried; "I can't find out a play-room in this big house; I don't like it: let us go back to the place we came from."

"No, Helena, you must stay here, and learn to love this place as I do."

"Why?" asked the child, opening her big blue eyes, while her mouth assumed a pouting expression.

"Because this is Flora's house, and the other which you like, we only went to for a time, on a visit. What do you prefer? To have a great many toys without me, or to stay near me as you are now?"

She lifted her on her knee, and the little one put her arms round her neck.

"You! you!" she cried; "even if you have no play-things to give me, I only want you."

"Dear child, be ever generous, not only towards Flora, who has given you all the love that can survive in a broken heart, but be devoted to your grandfather and to God; He Whom I have taught you to know, Helena, He Whom you worship with your baby heart and prayers, has created you for a great end, which will be reserved to you one day. Be faithful! and never let ambition or earthly dreams turn you away from the task you have to fulfil!"

And Flora laid her face on the little breast, which bore a red cross, strange and mysterious sign, of which Pope Sixtus had divined the import. Shall we say that children have another nature than ours? or that their intelligence may not be called out by contact with superior minds? Are not their pure, innocent hearts more fit than ours, perhaps, to divine the secrets of God? Helena crossed her little hands, listening to Flora's words, which lingered on her dawning mind, but only as an echo to be recalled in future years.

"Domina," cried Claudius, who, uniting the attributes of half-protector, half-slave, would serve, worship, advise, and sometimes scold, his young mistress by turns; "my dearest little Domina," and he hurried out of the house, his hands full of gardening tools, "I had supposed you to be more judicious. There is a storm in

the air, and you sit awaiting it, regardless of its effects on yourself or this child."

"What harm can a storm do us when it is as yet fifteen miles off? It is only now bursting over Rome. Do you rather sit down and rest, for you seem to have worked yourself into a fever; this cool atmosphere is so refreshing. Come and watch the lightning as it fitfully gleams, emblem of Rome's glory, whose sun I fear has set. Come, tell me of the news from the East, and I promise you that at the first drop of rain we shall go in."

"Lady Flora, whom I am ever advising, and ever constrained to obey," he replied as, wiping his forehead, he sat down on a mound of earth, and gladly accepted the loan of the little child that slipped off from Flora's knees to climb up his.

"I want to hear this morning's news from the Forum," resumed his mistress; "after our long absence from Rome, methinks I love my country more than ever!"

"I stopped with that intention in the Forum this morning on my way; the news was not proclaimed by the herald's voice as usual, but whispered low, from ear to ear; and well may Rome try to conceal the ignominious fate of her Emperor!"

"Why, we all know that Valerian is a prisoner."

"Ay! but there have been prisoners whose names are glorious as those of heroes; I would rather be a Regulus than a demi-god, were I a Roman. To be a prisoner of war is but a turn in the wheel of fortune; nor can a descendant of Caractacus see therein any shame; but

alas for Valerian ! I could almost be tempted to think that the blood of my young master and his friend has called for vengeance on the head of their persecutors ; but I have forgiven, even as they. Valerian, who might have saved them, and who decreed their death, repents, doubtless, bitterly now of his sin, for misfortune is a severe teacher. Shall I tell you how he has fallen ? My dignity as a man revolts, even while I speak ; indignation overmasters me. A slave to the proud Sapor ! Each day, as the barbarian king mounts his horse, and calls for a footstool, Valerian, a Roman Emperor, is brought forth, kneels down, and offers his neck to the man who is scarce worthy to loose his sandals !”

Flora started up with a groan ; she covered her face with her hands, and fairly burst into tears : “ Oh, my country ! Oh, Rome !” she cried.

“ Ay, Domina, I knew you would feel it, though the sorrow be not personal to you ; many affections have expired in your much-tried heart, but the love of country survives : *Fortis ut mors dilectio !*”

“ Oh, Claudius, how can he ? Why does he submit ? The blood boils in my veins at the thought of so much shame.”

“ Flora, in the story of the Hebrew people, as in ours, those who persecuted God’s elect were always punished.”

“ Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Let us leave it to His almighty hands. I thank God that by the help of His grace I never wished harm to Valerian, although he tore my brother from me. Had I breathed even in spirit a desire of revenge, then would the tears I

shed this day scald my own heart like drops of melted lead ; I should deem myself a sharer in Rome's ignominy, and weep, not over her, but over myself."

"And now?"

"And now let us prepare calmly, by a holy life, to meet that which our Heavenly Father sees fit to send us. Oh, if it be not wrong to desire death, I cannot help wishing for myself that it may come soon."

And it was at hand for the brave girl, who had been destined to remain watching at her post, while all those she loved fell one after the other on the bloody battlefield. A short time yet and the chaplets she laid on their tombs with pious care would grow faded, to be renewed no more ; for she, the living flower, would have fallen under the ruthless mower's scythe.

Gallienus, remaining alone to govern the empire, showed a daily increasing incapacity to hold the reins. He was an orator, a poet, a cook, everything but an emperor. He was not worthy to be a Roman, hardly a man ; for, while the heart of every mother's son in the empire burned with indignation at the recital of Valerian's wrongs, while every one asked to be led out to avenge his Emperor and Rome, Gallienus alone forgot the rights of his unhappy father. But his filial ingratitude did not remain unpunished. The man, so little fitted to occupy the throne, saw usurpers arise daily in every part of his empire. Cyriades, an obscure fugitive from Antioch, was made Emperor by Sapor ; and the newly crowned menial, out of gratitude to the Persian, led him over the Euphrates, and by the way of Chalcis

to the metropolis of the East. Antioch was surprised while the inhabitants were at the theatre ; the conquerer overran Syria and Cilicia, marking his course by devastation. The only check he received was from Odenathus, a noble and opulent senator of Palmyra, who collected an army, harassed the retreat of the Persians, and forced them to repass the Euphrates.

“Alas ! are our enemies more faithful to us than we are to ourselves and to each other ?” was the exclamation of Flora as Claudius daily brought her the news which had been discussed at the Forum. “Are this King of Palmyra and Zenobia his wife more zealous to punish Sapor than Gallienus himself ?”

It was not all ! Usurpers continued to spring up in the most unlooked-for quarters. Balista, Macrianus, and others of less name took up the title of Emperors of the East. Odenathus died ; and of the bright deeds of Zenobia his queen—fit to be an empress indeed, but harassed by adverse fortune—history speaks still. Rapine and oppression, the results of war, did their work. A long and general famine began in the distant provinces ; and, as Rome was supplied from these, the circle of death grew by degrees narrower and narrower, and would soon close around her.

“Now is our hour come,” said Flora, as her old counsellor and friend announced to her the new calamities about to fall upon them ; “the will of God be done, Claudius. I would rather have died a martyr’s death than linger on in starvation. But He Who watches over us does unto each of us as it seems to Him good ;

when it pleases him to strike Rome, so is his poor little handmaid ready."

But it was not time yet. Plague, the natural consequence of prolonged famine, devastated the provinces of the East. Was its approach to be more dreaded than that of hunger ?

One day a letter was brought to Flora by a lapidary from the East, who, banished from his country by want of work and the prospect of starvation, thought to find a refuge in the opulence of world-renowned Rome. The writer he spoke of as one he had known well, loved and admired, whose life had been a constant series of trials and triumphs. Death had now sealed for ever the fate of the world-renowned Origen. It was when persecuted and unhappy that he showed himself greater than in prosperity and renown. Condemned by the Church, he remained ever faithful to her ; exiled from his own school, he carried his teaching to all parts of the world. And at the close of his life he enjoyed the double honour of suffering for the faith, by being thrown into a dungeon as the most alarming defender of the new religion, and of replying by a triumphant apology to the most uprooting attack that ever assailed Christianity.

So persecuted was he that he could hardly find in all the East a corner wherein to shelter his old age ; and the lapidary, poor himself, had offered to share with him his scanty fare and humble abode. It was there he had closed his eyes, in the confident hope that God would be to him more merciful than men. But alas ! he had taught errors which would probably survive him.

He had often spoken to his kind host of Rome, advising him to seek his fortunes there, and, a few days before his death, had penned for him a letter, recommending him to one Florentius, whose courteous hospitality he had himself experienced during a stay in the Eternal City several years ago, precisely in that very country house of Aricia where Flora was now settled. She listened to these details with the deepest interest, and, even before perusing the letter, invited the bearer, who was evidently a Christian, to establish himself under her roof until he could get work. The times were hard for all classes, she observed, but he might find something to do in the neighbouring villas, or occupy himself in carving some fine onyx and other precious stones which had been found and collected by her father. The man was overjoyed, and gave expression to his gratitude by offering to work at some sacred vessels for the Church : he would also be glad to be of use to her slaves in sharing their agricultural pursuits.

“Then you will be sure to find an employer in Claudius,” said Flora, smiling, “for he contrives to be always at work.”

The two men withdrew, leaving her to read the last lines Origen had penned from his death-bed. They were addressed to her parents, both now at rest in their graves, and contained pious, holy counsels, the affectionate remembrance of one who had known them in days of domestic happiness, who had sat at their hearth. He spoke of his recollections of their little child whom he had baptised ; he hoped she had grown up true to

the faith, and he blessed her before he left this world. He concluded by asking the brethren to pray for Origen, who soon would be before his God.

Flora mused long over the memories of the past called up by this letter, wondering why those she loved did not call upon her to join them in the land where they had preceded her.

Did her prayers hasten the wished-for sacrifice, or was it fixed in the Eternal Counsels? Who can tell, save that her hour came? A new decree was issued. As if the supposed crimes of the Christians were not sufficient to expose them to the people's ill-will and consequent punishment, it was whispered that they were the cause of the famine which had spread, and of the plague that was approaching; therefore the Christians must die to expiate this crime, to appease the injured gods, and save the Roman people.

"Leave me, Claudius," said Flora, as this last most direful news reached her, "leave me, and save this blessed child. Go to more hospitable shores; return to Albion's rocky cliffs, and finish your life in peace."

"Will you come too, lady?"

"No, Claudius, my heart has become a tomb; I cannot carry it elsewhere."

"Flora, you have been faithful long enough to cherished memories; come with me to the land of my fathers, where, with God's help, we will extend His reign. What if the sacred fire of faith be proscribed, may we not bear it away, hidden, yet kindled, to those realms where our God may one day be known, and the

Isle of Albion become the Isle of Saints ? There is in Britain much work to be done for our Lord."

"Not for me," rejoined the girl solemnly, and she placed her hand on little Helena's brow, and raised her eyes, kindled as it were with a prophetic light, "not for me, but for this child."

"You seem to be quite resolved."

"Leave me, Claudius, a guardian of the true faith in my native land ; my duty is here. What though small be the beacon that lights the mariner to his home, it burns on steadily to the end. As long as the oil lasts with which it has pleased God to replenish the lamp of my frail life, so shall I prove faithful to the death."

"Brave heart, endowed with a woman's tenderness and a man's firmness, far be it from me to deter you from your noble, self-appointed task ! There is a reward above all rewards for the champion that remains alone on the battle-field, surviving even hope. Remain, then, in this land, which once gloried in the heroism of the pagan Clelia, and will be proud to count the maiden Flora among her worthy daughters. Honour to your sex and to your country, remain ! But, at the same time, register this oath ! The British chieftain who never broke his word holds you in trust, sacred pledge accepted at your mother's death-bed. Never will he abandon you ; whether to die in defending you from evil-doers, whether to assist at your last triumph and confide your fair form to an honoured grave, I remain by your side, never, by the shade of my forefathers, to abandon you as long as you live !"

“Claudius, what have you done?”

“I have sworn that which I will not retract.”

“And this child?”

“Is in the care of the Most High! He Himself will be her preserver!”

She placed her hands in his and thanked him, for verily, though her spirit was brave, it would have been hard to die without one faithful heart to lean on.

From that day she remained sheltered in her tranquil home, which was so secluded that Claudius hoped she might escape notice; but all Christians known to possess any property were eagerly sought after in this time of general dearth.

One day a party of soldiers came to seek Flora; they bore manacles in their hands. She rose from her work with a smile on her lips and came forward.

“Of what am I accused?” she asked.

“Of being a Christian related to Laurentius, who died a year ago; you abetted his disobedience to the laws of Rome.”

“The memory you evoke will teach *me* how to die,” she answered; “I am ready.”

She kissed little Helena and put her away. “This child and her grandfather are guests under this roof; Claudius is not a Roman but a British chief. Respect the rights of hospitality even while you do with me as you will. Warn him who sent you, that if he dare lay a finger upon these, he draws upon himself the anger and punishment of the noble house of Caradoc.”

The self-devoting spirit had fulfilled its trust to the end ; Claudius and his grandchild were saved.

A few days later it was announced that the games of the amphitheatre were to take place and to be offered up to appease the anger of the gods. The people were invited by heralds and sound of trumpet to be present at this welcome act of piety. It was the first time since the burning of the amphitheatre under the Emperor Macrianus that it could be put to use, and the restorations were on such an extensive scale that it bade fair to vie with the magnificence displayed in the days of Commodus, who was so passionately addicted to these amusements that he fought himself with the gladiators and wild beasts, taking refuge, when danger was nigh, in a secret passage leading to the imperial *suggestum*.

From her prison in the Mamertine Flora could hear the steps of the people as they hurried on to the scene of their favourite pastime. How anxious they were ! Many passed all the night on the stone steps, the better to secure their places. Oh God ! was she to die in the face of all these ? was her agony to be the amusement of the Roman people ? was she indeed to be thrown to the beasts ? Alas ! could she doubt it, when from these thousands that passed by her prison walls she heard an exclamation whose fearful import she knew too well ? It was spoken low as a precursor of the storm which was to burst over her devoted head in the arena :
“ *Christiani ad leones !* ”

Again she heard steps, but this time they were more regular, and the multitude ceased its tumultuous tread.

She knew these must be the gladiators, for she could hear them all with one voice repeat their oath: *Uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque necari, et quidquid aliud Eumolpus jussisset, tamquam legitimi gladiatores, domino corpora, animasque religiosissime addicimus.* It was the *familia* of the gladiators going out with their chieftain. Oh, God! when would her turn come? She knelt down and prayed.

Her door opened, she closed her eyes; she dared not ask if they came for her, but stretched out her manacled hands and bade them bear her away, for she was weary of waiting! And she spoke the truth, poor maiden! The cup of death is so bitter when we have to drink it in anticipation—ay, bitter before it touch our lips! A Man-God bowed down before the fearful vision, and His heart's blood oozed out. What wonder that a weak girl should feel that the last pang could scarce be worse than this! the cold sweat which even now damped her brow, and the sickening chill which paralyzed her breath and made her very pulse stand still.

“Will you not take me?” she repeated, and her chains clanked together from the trembling of her feeble hands.

But it was a woman's touch that responded to her tearful supplication; and before she knew what was to be done, the manacles were taken off.

An electric thrill ran through her system: “Was this liberty? were they delivering her?” She looked around. Her gaoler had spread before her delicate savoury viands, and a female slave was by her side, displaying the

costly robes and the turret-shaped crown peculiar to Cybele.

"What is this?" cried Flora; "who are you that come under the mask of pity to torment me the more?"

"We but obey our orders, Christian girl; you are to be immolated to Cybele, unless you sacrifice to her, and therefore you must wear her robes."

"What! do you think I would consent to counterfeit idolatry? It is enough that you have power to injure my body; but I will not wear a garment which my soul abhors."

Her hands had just been freed, and her chains lay on the ground with their hooked manacles open. Fired with a sudden impulse, Flora seized the embroidered vest, feigned to examine it; then fastening it on to the hooks, tore, with a strength which seemed to her not her own, till the idolatrous robe was rent into useless shreds.

The gaoler and slave uttered a simultaneous cry, then looked at each other. The prisoner had been so quick that they scarce realised the act till she stood triumphant before them, exclaiming: "Now do with me as you will!"

"Oh, lady," said the woman, "it is I that shall have to answer for this act of yours."

"Shall you? I am sorry for that; but tell your employers it was I did it. Tell them the victim that goes out like a lamb to the sacrifice, tramples like a lion on the badge of slavery and the livery of their false gods. I am a Roman and a free-born daughter of Romans, and my judges must respect my rights."

The gaoler requested her to be pacified and partake of the food he had brought her, that she might be fortified for the coming trial.

"Are these viands consecrated to the gods by some idolatrous rite?" she asked.

"No, maiden; 'tis but the repast of death generally served to the condemned as their last."

"I do not need it."

"Nay, hearken; there are some who, obstinate as you, disdained this last help to nature, and went out like stoics to their death. What ensued? their weakened bodies trembled so violently as they walked through the streets, that the lookers-on hooted them and asked if they were afraid to die."

"I see you are kind-hearted; you think my wan visage does no honour to your prison treatment; but it is not in the Mamertine that I have grown pale: the roses in my cheeks have long since faded away,—my youth expired with those I loved."

"Poor, dear lady!" and the rough man insisted so tenderly on her partaking of the food prepared for her that she complied.

"In your kindness," she said, "you resemble one who has tended me from my childhood upwards: thus would he too have pressed me to eat! for his sake I will obey thee."

"There is one, a foreigner, who each night comes to the door of the Mamertine, and begs of me to treat you gently: he carries in his arms a little child that kisses these walls which enclose you, and then he takes it away!"

"The faithful ones!" exclaimed Flora, and tears rose to impede her utterance; "would I could see them but once more!"

"I cannot admit them here, but, as we lead you out, that friend of yours shall be waiting for you, and you may speak to him while I purposely delay the guards."

"Thank you, kind gaoler. May that act of mercy be returned to you by *my* God, with Whom there is no exception of persons."

"He must be but a poor rewarder," observed the good-natured Cerberus, "if all He has to give His votaries is a prison and the axe, or worse."

"May the day come," replied Flora, "when you shall know and love Him as I do!"

"Peace, peace, maiden; you have spoken treason enough for *one* day."

She finished her last meal, the banquet of death as it was wont to be called, and knelt down to pray once more within her prison walls. How many had gone out from them to die! how many had found death there, even as Martina, her childhood's friend and first preceptress! How that dear, holy one must be looking down now on the child she had taught to walk in her footsteps, and to long for martyrdom, even before she understood its meaning. She was now going to meet her, in that realm where the blessed never grow old, where there is no winter and no night, where the tears are wiped from their eyes, and God Himself undertakes to console.

Oh, how many were gazing at her from above, how many were ready to meet her! She prayed, and there

was given to her, not a stoical insensibility, for the heart of man must needs beat as long as he lives, but a blunting of the keenness of suffering. It seemed to her as if she were in a dream, where unearthly voices spoke to her, filling her soul with a mysterious ardour, drowning all fears in the anticipation of an approaching triumph. What was to be the nature of her death? she enquired not, cared not,—it seemed to her that a palm-branch was waved to her from the skies, and that the angels who bore it wore the faces of those she had loved and lost. And then, hardly remembering what had gone before or knowing what was to follow, she went on, impelled by a strange force which seemed infused into her by a Superior Power. At the threshold of her prison she met Claudius, and the familiar countenance recalled her to herself.

“I fear your imprudence for you,” she said, “much as I value your devotion.”

“I am alone, my dear young mistress; I have followed to the last all those dear to you; could I forsake you now?”

“Will you look at me from afar off, good Claudius, and pray for me?”

“I will.”

“And when” . . . she shuddered and could not explain herself.

“I know your meaning, and I pledge my word that when all is over my hands alone shall bear all that remains of the virgin Flora to her honoured grave.”

“And after that you must leave Rome immediately.

Promise me this much, Claudius, for the sake of Helena, whom you must preserve for her great destiny."

"I shall obey you."

"Do not take me to the Catacombs: that would attract notice, and retard you from your journey home; but hearken, leave me in a resting-place equally dear and hallowed. Remember Martina's hurried burial, and that tomb we made for her in a cave in her own garden; let me lie near her, for I loved her well!"

"Your desire shall be carried out."

"And now, farewell. Time presses, and we are watched. Tell Helena that my last act on earth shall be to make the sign of the cross. She bears that sign; let her fulfil its high import!" And she left him.

Calmly, quietly, forgetful of the many eyes upon her, Flora walked on to her doom; the streets were not crowded at that hour, being only occupied by such as had been disappointed in their desire to enter the amphitheatre, and these collected round her whose death they could not witness. Some pitied her youth. She was known to be the last of a noble house, and her beauty, though faded by sorrow and neglect, was not effaced. It was derived less from the roundness of contour than from the reflection of the interior soul. Her sunken eyes retained that early expression which was a characteristic of the race from which she had sprung; they sought the Saviour, Whom her forefather had gazed upon.

The *ludus matutinus* was over: it was that part of the games which consisted in gladiators' exploits, and which

generally began the day. Sufficient regard had been shown to the maiden to admit of her entering the arena when those sports so repugnant to a delicate nature were at an end. She gave one look back on the Via Sacra which her ancestors had trod, on the Forum where so much of Rome's life had been acted, so many pages of her history unrolled; up to the Capitol, that old arx of Rome, witness to so many events of weal and woe. One look more, and she left country, life, hope, behind her, and for ever!

Around her were eager faces—a few compassionate, many longing for her death. Was she alone in the midst of them all? No! for there was one following her, who had watched over her from childhood. Claudius was nigh. Now she had reached the arena where thousands were ranged around her, row after row, one above another, like to a living bulwark, raised between her frail life and the world without. It was fearful! She covered her face with her hands and knelt down; for, alone as she stood there, was not her God more near to her than ever? and from the depths of her poor heart she poured forth her last prayer. For a while no one disturbed her; they were renewing the sand in the arena. Boys passed before her, raking it up; she did not heed them. Animals howled in their cages, and she wondered why they delayed so long. She looked up towards the imperial *podium*, and saw that it was empty. The Emperor had not yet arrived, and they were expecting him. Below his seat was that reserved to the Vestals. It was they, maidens like herself, who

were to pronounce on her fate and propel it onwards. She thought of Volumnia! how happy and calm was her lot! away from Rome, where they had thought to consign her to the tomb, now a Christian, a wife and a mother. What a contrast with herself! yet she had served their common Master as faithfully. He had saved Volumnia, and abandoned her to her fate.

Oh the bitter moment, when the love we have trusted to the utmost seems to fail! Our heart recoils from the very fear of that revelation, and shrinks into itself with a mute despair.

“My God, my God!” cried Flora, “I have trusted in Thee,” and the anguish of that cry was the echo of one which had pleaded for her on the cross three hundred years before.

There arose in the arena a murmur as of the waves of the sea rolling over the sands on the shore. On the marble tripods ornamenting each *balteus*, fires were lit simultaneously, and burning perfumes emitted a sweet odour. A pleasant shade fell over the amphitheatre as the cerulean awning, studded with golden stars, was drawn over the spectators, and from the midst of them burst a universal cry of exultation, as all rose to their feet. Cæsar had entered the amphitheatre. He passed on to the gilt *podium*, preceded by the flourish of trumpets: his presence was necessary to grace the sports. With a wave of his hand he bade all present sit down, and drew forth his tablets, for he felt the inspirations of the Muse, and would fain record that day's doings in verse.

Flora had stood up with the rest. The *venatores* had entered the arena, they marched together as they went to present their obeisance to Cæsar, and made a sign to the young girl to do likewise. Destined, they to play with the beasts, she to be their victim, each and all must pass before the Emperor with the formula : *Cæsar, morituri te salutant*. Had they failed in this duty, the *bestiarii* were at hand to remind them of it, each armed with a cruel whip ; but the *venatores* had the courage that plays with death, Flora, the calm self-reliance that goes forth to meet its doom. The only woman, the only martyr, either because the games had been proclaimed too suddenly to institute a minute search after Christians, or because her brethren had learned prudence from persecution and effectually concealed themselves, she rejoiced that God had chosen her as a victim, and that it was given her to die for her people. Modestly, and with joined hands as she had often gone to prayer, she walked on, under the gaze of that countless multitude, raised her eyes to look at Gallienus, and, in that universal hush, her gentle voice was borne towards him : “ *Moritura te salutat !* ”

He observed that she was not clothed in the sumptuous garments with which it was customary to robe the victim, to render it pleasing to the gods ; he enquired the reason, and turned an angry look on the guards, but she took upon herself to answer :

“ Cæsar,” she resumed, draping her *stola* modestly round her, “ I plead my rights as a Roman maiden ; I wish to meet death in the garb I have borne spotless

Cæsar me salutabit. et. salut. i. i. i.

through life. Flora scorns to be a pagan even in appearance. Do not refuse me ; I bear on my finger a signet ring which has graced an imperial hand. By the blood of the murdered Gordian, whose memory is still revered, I call upon the Roman people to plead a Roman daughter's cause !”

She held up the ring she alluded to, and a murmur of assent arose from the crowd. When the hum of voices had subsided, she spoke once more :

“About to die, I salute thee, oh, Cæsar ; may my blood not fall upon thee ! for the imperial throne is sufficiently stained with crimes. If my dying prayer reach thee, save my brethren for thy own sake, save thy father for the sake of Rome. If thou delay, a woman is rising in the East who will shame thee ; fear lest the Queen of Palmyra avenge the wrongs of Valerian and the death of Flora !”

She ceased, but there arose a murmur which none could quell. Pity, admiration, national pride, spoke loud in the breasts of the Romans for her who was one of themselves. The impression was noticed ; and instead of her being reserved for the last part of the spectacle, as was the wont with human victims, the cry went forth against her : “ *Christiana ad leonem !* ”

She heard ; and in that dread moment of suspense, when all her young strength arose within her, as if to arm her against the imminent danger, it seemed as if each faculty were doubled. A while ago she could hardly see anything ; now her sense of vision received each impression, as if it were distinct and solitary.

Those human faces seemed to be brought in fearful vicinity to hers ; she could distinguish the features of each. With a strange, involuntary pertinacity she gazed on the lower, then the middle, then the higher benches of the amphitheatre. She could hear the women of the lower classes, deterred from sitting like their betters, and gathered together in the portico, say one to another : “ Who is this who, dressed as a bride, goes out a martyr, alone ? ”

Her courage forsook her for a moment ; she yielded mechanically to the guards who dragged her away from the foot of the imperial *podium*. “ Was there no one to help her ? ” she thought. “ Oh, God ! it was very fearful to die ! ”

Was her sight failing her, or was her imagination wandering in a land of dreams ? The ground yawned where she had stood but a moment before, and displayed those huge mechanical contrivances so loved by Nero, and concealed in the vaults beneath the arena of the Coliseum. Artificial trees rose above the soil ; also a hill, constructed of wood, but so covered with verdure as effectually to conceal its foundation : it was overrun with hares and inoffensive animals. From adjoining cages were heard the lion’s roar and the panther’s howl. This was a spectacle prepared for the amusement of the Roman people, in which the martyr was to figure ; but besides her, *venatores* richly clad appeared on the arena. They were divided into small bands, and ranged themselves behind the trees so as to secure a momentary refuge from the assault of the animals on their first

spring. Flora saw and instinctively followed their example, but they pushed her from them with their javelins; they were armed, and none would protect *her*, poor, defenceless girl!

For a few minutes the *velarium* waved in the breeze, the sun glared fiercely on the hot sand. Flora raised her hands to protect her head from its scorching rays; but, while shading her eyes from the light, she met a steadfast gaze, under which she remained fascinated, spell-bound.

The cages had been opened, the animals goaded, but the heat was so intense that even the lords of the forests stretched listlessly in their dens, not caring for food; the hares ran about nimbly; a lion stalked forth with outstretched tongue, parched with thirst; he looked round for water, nothing lay before him but the fresh raked sand: wearily, almost lazily, he went up towards Flora, then stopped at a few paces' distance, and their eyes met with that expression of fear, that effort for mastery which the human and brute creation have felt towards each other since Adam's fall. A few seconds and the indignant cries of the multitude proclaimed their disappointment; then, cautiously, one of the *venatores* stepped behind the lion, goaded him again two or three times, then nimbly drew aside. The beast uttered a savage roar which made the spectators tremble in their seats; he was on the point of tearing down the trees which stood between him and the object of his wrath, when the *venator* changed his position, placed himself stealthily behind Flora, and, taking a handful of

sand from the ground, threw it into the monster's eyes, then made his escape. The beast yelled with pain, leaped upon the girl, who fell down stretched at full length before him. In that helplessness lay her safety, for she looked like one already dead. But anger, not hunger, was astir in the lion now: indignantly he fastened his huge claw in her white *stola*; the frail tissue gave way, but Flora was still unhurt. Her terror ceased, virgin modesty restored to her all her courage; the blush of maidenly fear brought back life to the face that had been corpse-like a moment before; she rose to her knees, and, quickly transposing the *fibula* which Roman ladies wore as an ornament to that part of her dress which the lion had torn, she stood up, draped from head to foot as before. "I am ready, my God," she cried, raising her hands in the attitude of prayer; "let the end come quickly!"

An involuntary shriek ran through the female part of the assembly, for she was seen to fall forward, while the lion's paw was at her waist; her life's blood gushed forth, her white bridal garments were tinged, and there lay the flower that had weathered the storms of life, parched, bruised, torn from its stem, on the soil of the arena.

The Martyr Bride had gone to the Spirit and the Bridegroom that say: Come!

The lion licked the blood, buried his teeth in the fair flesh, but was soon satiated; the overpowering influence of the weather laid his brute instincts dormant. Weary and panting with thirst, he left the corpse half-devoured.

The youths of the amphitheatre came to rake it away, unheeded, for the public attention was now engrossed by a new spectacle : the *venatores* were about to open the lion chase : a musician came forward, playing upon the lyre, and surrounded by small animals ; an apt representation of Orpheus taming the inhabitants of the forest by music : timid hares ran round the arena and through the trees. After a while a tiger and a panther were let loose, and the excitement rose to its full height ; the chase lasted for hours.

Did any one remember or care for the poor girl whose mangled remains had been raked away with the blood-stained sand ?

There is in every amphitheatre a vaulted chamber where the dead are heaped up, where the bruised gladiator has his wounds attended to, or is secretly despatched ; it is a loathsome den of which no one in particular has the care. When the scavengers of the arena bore thither the yet warm corpse, huddled up in its torn garment, they found there an elderly man bearing the same garb as themselves, but quite a stranger. He awaited them with vast sums of gold which he offered as the price to ransom that dead body. They supposed he had been bribed to do this work, and was sharing with them his hard-earned reward ; they helped him to cover up the prize he coveted and carried it away concealed in a bale of canvas. He changed his dress to assume that of a sailor. There were many employed in fastening the *velarium*, he joined them, helped them

with great activity and obligingness, then went his way unquestioned.

* * * * *

That night a party of workmen were busily employed in a garden near the Mamertine prison. By the side of a tomb, where many years ago the martyred Martina had been laid, they were now hewing out another grave in the rock. When finished, they knelt round it, and the eldest raised respectfully in his arms a corpse wrapped in fine linen with precious perfumes and ointments. He laid it down in its narrow bed, while those who stood around threw roses and lilies into the tomb.

They waited a little before covering it up, for he who directed them was stooping over it, breathing a last farewell to the child over whose cradle he had watched; and now his promise to her was fulfilled, he had laid her in a consecrated grave.

The next day at early dawn he was there again, and a child was by his side; her little hands were clasped, and her eyes dimmed with the first bitter tears of sorrow she had ever shed.

"Father," she said, "it cannot be true, for there is no name here."

The man raised her, and showed her a phial of blood; he made her touch the liquid: "Thou art right," he replied; "we must mark this stone; be thou the first to place on it the sign thou lovest the most".

The child readily obeyed, and her fingers formed a cross! Mysterious emblem which denoted the future

destiny of the little one. Below it, Claudius roughly engraved the name of Flora, surrounded by a palm branch, her age, and the day of her decease.

FLORA

IV KAL.AUG.



Flora, the Roman martyr, is not forgotten, for each year when, on the 28th of January, the sepulchre of Martina, near the Mamertine prison, is illuminated and decked more gorgeously than a bridal chamber, thither congregate all that Rome holds most illustrious, noble, and good. There is, in an angle to the right, another chapel with another tomb, which, though less adorned, has a strange power of attracting towards it the gay crowd from without. It is hewn in the rock, without marble or chiselled sculpture to tell its tale; it is the last resting-place of Flora the martyr.

From the day they first laid her there, Claudius and little Helena were seen no more. Time rolled on; the imperial throne often changed its master. At last it was possessed by three at once, of whom one was Constantius Chlorus, who dwelt long in Britain. When the Roman conquests had extended to such a degree that peace became a craving desire, and an alliance with the

conquered a necessity, it was rumoured that Constantius had closed the wars in Britain by espousing a maiden of that country. At first the news was unwelcome, but murmuring ceased when Rome heard that the Roman purple graced one who was herself of royal blood. Helena was a British princess, the last of the illustrious line of Car-a-doc and daughter to King Coël, who had surrounded Colchester with walls.

Thus a bright future seemed to await Helena, and when she accompanied her husband on one of his journeys to Rome, her beauty, grace, and majestic demeanour won the admiration of the people, among whom she seemed destined to reign. It was remarked of her, as a strange gift, that she spoke the Roman language with great purity, and all loved her for her unassuming gentleness, but she had been marked with the Cross from early childhood, and she was to bear it all her life, both in sorrow and in triumph. In the heart of Constantius Chlorus ambition overruled conjugal affection; Maximinus Hercules had chosen him as Caesar supplementarily, and insisted on bestowing on him the hand of his own step-daughter, Theodora. To further this union Helena must be repudiated, and the virtuous consort, mother to the young prince Constantine, was sacrificed to ambition and obliged to retire into obscurity, until the day when her own son, becoming Emperor in his turn, recalled her to court, proclaimed her Augusta all over the Empire, and by his dutiful behaviour endeavoured to repay her for past neglect. The high principles which Helena's early

education had instilled into Constantine bore their fruit. He too had a special vocation; he was called upon to establish Christianity in the palace of the Cæsars. A mysterious sign appeared in the heavens, and he knew that the hour was come for him to conquer by that Cross which his mother silently revered.

The Empress Helena was eighty years of age when she fulfilled the promises of her childhood. It was given to her to discover the True Cross, to see it publicly honoured, and to build a church in Rome wherein to deposit the sacred relics she brought from Jerusalem. Often too she was observed to direct her steps to an unknown garden near the Mamertine prison; there she would enter and pray by a grave hewn in the rock. A Christian church soon rose over that spot, and it is sacred to this day to the memory of Martina.

The Empress also diligently sought in the Holy Land after the various places honoured by our Lord's dolorous Passion and sacred footsteps. The staircase in the house of Pontius Pilate, which He ascended more than once, became to her an object of special veneration; and she got every step removed with great care and conveyed to Rome. She was the first to ascend the *Scala Sancta*, which she got reconstructed not far from her favourite Basilica, the Holy Cross of Jerusalem. Then, and not till then, did she enter into the joy of her Lord.

And now all those we have seen following in the footsteps of their Crucified Master have attained the crown of martyrdom or of sanctity. Blessed be woman

when God appoints her to do great things for His people, placing in her hand the beacon light of self-devotion, of patriotism, or of piety, which burns pure and steadfast in her grasp.

Blessed be those who, called to walk the narrow, steep path of self-sacrifice, tread it bravely to the end. There is a mighty, mysterious force in the heart which chooses to itself a noble destiny to fulfil.



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